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News Release



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Revised Critical Habitat Proposed for Pacific Coast Population of Western Snowy Plover

Public comments accepted until May 23, 2011

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) today proposed to revise the critical habitat designation for the Pacific Coast population of the western snowy plover, a threatened species protected under the Endangered Species Act. The proposal includes 68 critical habitat units totaling 28,261 acres along the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington. Public comments will be accepted for the next 60 days.

Of the proposed units, 51 are in California, 13 are in Oregon, and 4 are in Washington. Of the total acreage, 9,040 acres are on federal lands; 12,740 acres are owned by states or local agencies; and 6,145 acres are located on private lands. In addition, 336 acres are tribal lands in Washington.

Approximately 1,704 acres of essential habitat that are found on lands owned or under the control of the Department of Defense are exempt from this proposed rule. We exempted these lands because they are covered by Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans that provide conservation benefits to the species.

Compared to the existing 2005 critical habitat designation, this proposal includes more than twice as many total acres and more critical habitat units. In part, this is to offset anticipated adverse effects of rising sea level resulting from climate change. In addition, the agency's policy direction in 2005 emphasized the designation of occupied habitat for critical habitat designations, while the current policy direction encourages more consideration of the role that unoccupied habitat can provide for the conservation of the species to better support recovery.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species, and which may require special management

considerations or protection. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, establish a refuge or preserve and has no impact on private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits.

Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat

Several changes have been proposed within the 2011 proposed revised critical habitat designation:

	2005 critical habitat	2011 proposal
Total:	12,145 ac, 32 units	28,261 ac, 68 units
WA:	2,526 ac, 3 units	6,265 ac, 4 units
OR:	2,147 ac, 5 units	5,219 ac, 13 units
CA:	7,477 ac, 24 units	16,777 ac, 51 units

Since the species was listed as threatened, many local groups have voluntarily worked to protect plovers and their breeding areas, and to help educate the beach-using public about the bird's needs. In many areas, beach users have cooperated with local interests to improve the breeding situation for plovers.

The Pacific Coast western snowy plover is a small shorebird with pale brown to gray upper parts, gray to black legs and bill, and dark patches on the forehead, behind the eyes, and on either side of the upper breast. The Pacific Coast population of the western snowy plover is defined as those individuals nesting adjacent to tidal waters of the Pacific Ocean, and includes all nesting birds on the mainland coast, peninsulas, offshore islands, adjacent bays, estuaries and coastal rivers. The Pacific Coast population of the western snowy plover breeds primarily on coastal beaches from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico.

Biologists estimate that no more than 2,270 snowy plovers breed along the Pacific Coast of the United States with approximately an equal number breeding on the west coast of Baja California. The largest number of breeding birds occurs south of San Francisco Bay to southern Baja. The species' decline has been attributed to loss of nesting habitat, human disturbance, encroachment of European beach grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) on nesting grounds, and predation.

The health of threatened and endangered species is strongly linked to our own well-being. Millions of Americans depend on habitat that sustains species like the Pacific Coast population of western snowy plover – for clean air and water, recreational opportunities and for their livelihoods. By taking action to protect imperiled native fish, wildlife and plants, we can ensure a healthy future for our communities.

The Pacific Coast population of the western snowy plover was listed as a “distinct population segment,” on March 5, 1993. We are revising the 2005 critical habitat designation for this species as a result of legal action.

The proposed rule will publish on March 22, 2011, but an advance copy is available for viewing at <http://www.federalregister.gov>.

The Service is seeking comments and information on all aspects of this proposed rule and will accept comments and information until May 23, 2011.

Comments and information can be submitted electronically to www.regulations.gov. In the box that reads “Enter Keyword or ID,” enter the Docket number for this finding, which is FWS-R8-ES-2010-0070. Check the box that reads “Open for Comment/Submission,” and then click the Search button. You will see an icon that

reads "Submit a Comment." Please ensure that you have found the correct rulemaking before submitting your comment.

If submitting comments by hard copy or hand delivery, please send them to: Public Comments Processing, Attn: Docket No. FWS-R8-ES-2010-0070, Division of Policy and Directives Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222, Arlington, VA 22203.

The deadline for submission of a final revised critical habitat designation to the *Federal Register* is June 5, 2012.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

Note: A listing and maps of the proposed critical habitat units, a link to the *Federal Register*, and other information is available on our website at <http://www.fws.gov/arcata/>.

A photo of the western snowy plover is available on [Flickr](#)