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NEWS BULLETIN

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Proposed Critical Habitat in Arkansas for Two Mussel Species and Next Steps

In recent weeks, media stories and testimony at State and Federal hearings have included inaccurate information about the proposed critical habitat for two mussel species found in Arkansas, the Neosho mucket and rabbitsfoot mussel.

The proposed critical habitat for these mussel species totals less than 900 stream miles, or less than 8 percent of the Natural State's total stream miles as defined by the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality. That is a small fraction of the number some have purported. A map showing the proposed critical habitat is available at http://www.fws.gov/arkansas-es/docs/20131219_Rabbitsfoot_NM_Map_ARK_FINAL.pdf. More information on the proposal is available at http://www.fws.gov/arkansas-es/te_listing.html.

The Service is required under the Endangered Species Act to consider critical habitat for federally protected species. The Neosho mucket was listed as endangered and the rabbitsfoot mussel was listed as threatened under the Act last September.

Other federally protected mussel species have lived for decades in the vast majority of the streams proposed for critical habitat. The Service is not proposing any new conservation actions that have not already been in place for those listed mussels. In addition, for most landowners, the designation of critical habitat will have no impact. For example, it will not prohibit a farmer from allowing cattle to cool down in a river, or from driving a vehicle through a stream on their property. Critical habitat is primarily a tool to alert federal agencies that they are required to make a special effort at conservation when they work in an area designated as critical habitat, or fund other to work there, or permit work by others.

Additionally, critical habitat has been designated in Arkansas in the past for two other species: the leopard darter in 1978 and the yellowcheek darter in 2012. Improved conservation of imperiled species can be achieved in concert with continued development.

The last of three public comment periods totaling 150 days closed October 28, 2013. Based on comments received, the Service is currently revising the area to be designated critical habitat. The final designated area is expected to be smaller than the original proposal. The Service plans to issue a final decision in March. At that point, the Service

will host a town hall-style meeting to answer questions and provide further clarification about listing actions and critical habitat, and what they mean to Arkansans. In the meantime, the Service is reaching out to stakeholders and welcome questions as they arise, which can be directed to Arkansas Field Office Supervisor Jim Boggs, listed above.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to work with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.