



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southeast Region
Georgia Field Office



NEWS RELEASE

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Service Re-opens Comment Period for the Georgia Rockcress Proposed Listing and Critical Habitat and Announces Economic Analysis

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is announcing the availability of the draft economic analysis for the proposed critical habitat designation for the Georgia rockcress. At the same time, the Service is re-opening the comment period for the proposed listing and associated proposed critical habitat designation for 30 days through June 10, 2014. The public is invited to submit comments on either issue.

Only about 5,000 individual rockcress plants still exist, and the plant is proposed for listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The rockcress is only found in Georgia and Alabama, where the Service is proposing to designate about 793 acres along river bluffs as critical habitat. The proposed critical habitat designations are located in Gordon, Floyd, Harris, Muscogee, Chattahoochee, and Clay Counties, Georgia, and; in Bibb, Dallas, Elmore, Monroe, Russell, Sumter and Wilcox Counties in Alabama. The rockcress occurs in each of the areas proposed for designation as critical habitat

A public information meeting and hearing concerning the draft economic analysis, as well as the proposals for listing and critical habitat for the rockcress, is scheduled at Columbus State University, 4225 University Avenue, Magnolia Room, in Columbus, Georgia. The meeting will take place on May 28, 2014, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. The public is invited to attend and provide comments. People needing reasonable accommodations in order to attend or participate in this hearing should contact the field office at 706/613-9493, as soon as possible.

The proposed listing and designation of critical habitat for the rockcress and the associated draft economic analysis are part of the Service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan aimed at addressing a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA listing program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce a litigation-driven workload. The Georgia rockcress has been a candidate for listing since 1999.

Although most of the areas within the proposed rockcress critical habitat designations are located on private land, activities on these lands will not be affected, unless activities on these lands are authorized, funded, or carried out by a federal agency. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. If federal funds are involved in a project in the area, the government agency involved will need to work with (consult) the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce, or mitigate potential impacts to the plant or to ensure actions do not negatively affect the rockcress or modify its critical habitat.

Under the ESA, federal agencies are required to make a special effort at conservation when they work in an area designated as critical habitat for a listed species. The economic analysis estimates the cost of consultations with the Service when a federal agency does work in an area designated as critical habitat, or funds or permits work done by others. Federal, state, and local government agencies and some projects may incur costs for work involving federal funding or a federal permit. The estimate does not include any costs incurred as a result of the proposed listing.

The draft economic analysis concluded the economic impacts of the proposed designation are not likely to exceed \$45,000 in 2014 dollars in any given year. The estimated, maximum cost per consultation is \$9,000, and the estimated number of consultations is five a year. Critical habitat is not likely to generate additional consultations and in circumstances where consultation does occur, additional project modifications beyond what is required to avoid jeopardizing the rockcress are unlikely.

Georgia rockcress generally occurs on steep river bluffs with shallow soils overlaying rock or with exposed rock outcroppings. Habitat degradation and the invasion of exotic species are the most serious threats to the plant's continued existence. Disturbance, associated with timber harvesting, road building, quarrying, grazing, and hydropower dam construction, creates favorable conditions for the invasion of exotic weeds, especially Japanese honeysuckle. Most rockcress populations are threatened by the presence of exotics.

Some recovery actions are already underway to conserve Georgia rockcress. The largest population of the plant (more than 1,600 stems) occurs on Fort Benning, Georgia. The Service is working with Fort Benning to revise its Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan to protect Georgia rockcress and its habitat. In addition, Georgia Power also manages and maintains one of the largest populations of Georgia rockcress (about 1,000 stems) in Harris and Muscogee Counties.

The Service first proposed listing the rockcress as threatened with critical habitat on September 12, 2013. Comments on these proposals and the draft economic analysis may be addressed at the public hearing in Columbus, Georgia or mailed by June 10, 2014. Comments can be filed electronically at <http://www.regulations.gov>, ATTN: FWS-R4-ES-2013-0100 or FWS-R4-ES-2013-0030. For more information, please visit <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/> and/or <http://www.fws.gov/athens/>

Landowners interested in helping the Service recover the Georgia rockcress, or seeking more

information about the potential implications of the listing and critical habitat designation should contact Jimmy Rickard at the Georgia Ecological Services Office in Athens, Georgia, 105 Westpark Drive, Suite D, Athens, Georgia 30606 (telephone 706/613-9493, extension 223; facsimile 706/613-6059). The Service offers willing landowners a number of voluntary and non-regulatory conservation programs to help the rockcress survive as they live and work on their lands.

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