

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Threatened Status and Critical Habitat for the Georgia Rockcress

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to list the Georgia rockcress as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Only found in Georgia and Alabama, the plant has been a candidate for listing as a Threatened species since 2000.

At the same time, the Service also is proposing to designate about 786 acres of river bluff habitat as the plant's critical habitat. The proposed critical habitat areas in Georgia include lands in Gordon, Floyd, Harris, Muscogee, Chattahoochee, and Clay Counties. In Alabama, the proposed critical habitat designation includes areas in Bibb, Dallas, Elmore, Monroe, Russell, Sumter and Wilcox Counties.

Only about 5,000 individual plants still exist. 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 ESA requires the Service to identify the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species, called critical habitat. This identification helps federal agencies identify actions that may affect listed species or their habitat and to work with the Service to avoid or minimize those impacts. Identifying this habitat also helps raise awareness of the habitat needs of imperiled species and focuses the conservation efforts of other partners such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual landowners.

Although non-federal lands are included in the areas proposed as critical habitat for the Georgia rockcress, activities on these lands will not necessarily be affected unless they are authorized, funded, or carried out by a federal agency. In such cases, the lead federal agency will need to consult with the Service to ensure actions do not jeopardize the plant or adversely modify its

critical habitat.

The Service's identification of proposed critical habitat areas is based on the best scientific information available, and considers all relevant information provided by the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, and other interested parties during a 60-day comment period.

A complete description of the proposed rule will be published in the *Federal Register* on September 12, 2013. The public may mail comments and materials concerning the proposed listing of the Georgia rockcress as Threatened (Docket number FWS-R4-ES-2013-0100) and/or the proposed critical habitat designation (Docket number FWS-R4-ES-2013-0030) to Public Comments Processing, Attn: Docket number FWS-R4-ES-2013-0100 (proposed listing), and/or Docket number FWS-R4-ES-2013-0030 (proposed critical habitat designation), Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, MS 2042-PDM; Arlington, VA 22203. Comments also can be filed electronically at <http://www.regulations.gov>, using the docket numbers listed above.

All comments must be received by November 12, 2013, and must include a first and last name, city, state, country and zip code. Any comments and materials the Service receives, as well as supporting documentation used in preparing this proposed rule and maps, will be available for public inspection on <http://www.regulations.gov>, on <http://www.fws.gov/athens/>, or by contacting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Athens, Georgia. Please contact Jimmy Rickard, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia Ecological Services Office, 105 Westpark Drive, Suite D, Athens, Georgia 30606 (telephone 706/613-9493, extension 223; facsimile 706/613-6059).

Requests for a public hearing must be made in writing by October 28, 2013, to the Arlington, VA, address shown immediately above.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov/southeast. Connect with us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwssoutheast, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws>, and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwssoutheast>.