

News Release
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes to List Three Caribbean Plants and to Designate Critical Habitat for Each

The vivid red flowers of *Gonocalyx concolor* hang like tiny bells throughout dense and wet areas at highest point elevations of the Carite Commonwealth Forest in Puerto Rico. Deep yellow *Agave eggersiana* flowers stand tall on the arid coastal cliffs of the Island of St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, to face the ocean. *Varronia rupicola*'s petite white flowers are surrounded by rough, green leaves and together beautify low coastal shrub forests in southern Puerto Rico and Vieques Island. To protect these plants and their habitats, the Service is proposing to extend protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for *Agave eggersiana* and *Gonocalyx concolor* as an endangered species, and *Varronia rupicola* as a threatened species.

At the same time, the Service is proposing to identify areas that are essential for the conservation of these plants. About 51 acres of critical habitat is proposed for *Agave eggersiana* in St. Croix, USVI; 198 acres for *Gonocalyx concolor* in Puerto Rico; and 6,547 acres for *Varronia rupicola* in southern Puerto Rico and Vieques Island.

The Service is seeking new information from the public and the scientific community that will help in making a final determination about the proposed listings and critical habitat designations. *Agave eggersiana* has been a candidate for federal listing since September 22, 2010. *Varronia rupicola* and *Gonocalyx concolor* have been candidates since October 25, 1999.

The proposed listings and designation of critical habitat for these three plants are part of the Service's effort to implement a court-approved work plan that resolves a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA Listing Program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce litigation-driven workloads and allow the agency to focus its resources on the species most in need of the ESA's protections over the next five years.

When a species is proposed for listing as endangered or threatened under the ESA, the Service must consider whether there are areas of habitat it believes are essential to the species' conservation. Those areas may be proposed for designation as critical habitat.

The Service will decide whether to extend ESA protection for these plants after evaluating all available information. The Service is seeking information on distribution and threats to these plants and their habitats. If the three plants are listed under the ESA and critical habitats are designated, the Service will work cooperatively with partners to conserve their habitats. In addition, federal agencies would need to ensure activities they authorize, fund, or carry out are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of these plants or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat.

Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. Critical habitat designation does not impose restrictions on non-federal lands unless federal funds, permits, or activities are involved. Designating critical habitat on federal or non-federal lands informs landowners and the public of the specific areas that are important to the conservation of the species. Identifying this habitat also helps focus the conservation efforts of other conservation partners, such as commonwealth and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individuals. The designation of critical habitat on private land has no impact on private landowner activities that do not require federal funding or federal permits. The designation of critical habitat is only applicable to federal activities.

Many organizations are working with the Service to conserve these plants. Designating these plants as threatened and endangered would allow the Service to intensify its partnerships with organizations implementing conservation measures like the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens, the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust, St. George Botanical Garden, the St. Croix Environmental Association, United States Virgin Island Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service and private landowners. For example, the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens developed a germination and cultivation protocol for *Varronia rupicola*, and the National Park Service planted more than 100 juvenile *Agave eggersiana* plants on its lands in St. Croix.

All three Caribbean plants face some or all of the following threats to their existence: Hurricanes, habitat loss and degradation from development; fires, competition from non-native plants, predation and disease caused by insects, such as weevils, poor enforcement of existing laws and regulations, and small and disconnected populations.

Public comments on these proposed rules can be submitted through December 23, 2013. Requests for a public hearing must be made in writing by December 5, 2013. To request a public hearing, please contact Marelisa Rivera, Caribbean Ecological Services Office, P.O. Box 491, Road 301 Km 5.1, Boquerón, Puerto Rico, Phone: 787-851-7297, or e-mail at marelisa_rivera@fws.gov.

Comments should be submitted by one of the following methods:

- **Federal eRulemaking Portal:** <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments on Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2013-0103, for the proposed listing and FWS-R4-ES-2013-0040, for the proposed critical habitat designation.
- **U.S. mail or hand-delivery:** Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2013-0103, for the proposed listing and FWS-R4-ES-2013-0040, for the proposed critical habitat designation, Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 222, Arlington, VA 22203. All comments, including personal information, will made be available on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

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