

NEWS RELEASE

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## **U.S. Fish and Service Protects Three Caribbean plants Under Endangered Species Act**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is listing the plants *Agave eggersiana* and *Gonocalyx concolor* as endangered and *Varronia rupicola* as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The listing goes into effect on October 9, 2014, 30 days following its publication in the *Federal Register*.

At the same time, the Service is designating critical habitat for the three species. About 51 acres of critical habitat has been designated for *Agave eggersiana* in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands; 198 acres for *Gonocalyx concolor* in Puerto Rico; and 6,547 acres for *Varronia rupicola* in southern Puerto Rico and Vieques Island. The critical habitat designation consists of *A. eggersiana* with 45.8 percent in U.S. Virgin Islands Territory (St. Croix) lands and 54.2 percent in private lands; *G. concolor* with all of its habitat in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico; and *V. rupicola* with about 7.7 percent in federal lands, 28.5 percent in Commonwealth of Puerto Rico lands and 63.8 percent in private lands.

These three plants are rare. *Agave eggersiana*, with deep yellow flowers stand tall in arid coastal cliffs and coastal shrubland to face the ocean. This species is particularly vulnerable to collection. 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. *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. 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, and small and disconnected populations.

Many organizations are already working with the Service to conserve these plants, including the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens, the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust, St. George Botanical Garden, the St. Croix Environmental Association, Vieques and Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuges, U.S. Virgin Islands 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 plan for *Varronia rupicola*, and the National Park Service planted more than 100 juvenile *Agave eggersiana* plants on its lands in St. Croix.

The public may view materials concerning these final rules at <http://www.regulations.gov>, using the docket numbers FWS–R4–ES–2013–0103 (listing) and FWS-R4-ES-2013-0040 (critical habitat). The ultimate goal of the ESA is the recovery of these listed plants so that they no longer need protection under the ESA. The next step is to develop recovery plans that provide guidance for the Service and its conservation partners to address threats to the plants’ survival and recovery.

Although some of the areas within these plants’ critical habitat designation are located on private land, activities on these lands will not be affected, unless such activities 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 consult with the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce, or mitigate potential impacts to the plants or to ensure proposed actions do not adversely affect or modify its critical habitat.

The benefit of designating critical habitat for a listed plant or animal is that it informs government agencies, 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 state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individuals. The Service’s identification of 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 the public comment period.

The Service offers willing landowners a number of voluntary and non-regulatory conservation programs to help these imperil species survive as they live and work on their lands. Landowners interested in helping the Service recover these three Caribbean plants, or seeking more information about the implications of the listing and critical habitat designation, please contact the Caribbean Ecological Services Field Office at P.O. Box 491, Boquerón, Puerto Rico 00622, or contact Marelisa Rivera at 787-851-7297, or via e-mail at [marelisa\\_rivera@fws.gov](mailto:marelisa_rivera@fws.gov).

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. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit [www.fws.gov/southeast](http://www.fws.gov/southeast). Connect with us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast](http://www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast), follow our tweets at [www.twitter.com/usfwssoutheast](http://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>.

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