

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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News Release



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Service Determines Coastal California Gnatcatcher is a Subspecies and Remains Threatened under Endangered Species Act

Regional Conservation Planning Efforts Will Continue Across the Subspecies' Range

Carlsbad, Calif. – The coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*), a subspecies of the California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica*) does not warrant removal from protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Today's announcement is in response to a 2014 petition from the Pacific Legal Foundation to delist the coastal California gnatcatcher due to error. The petition asserted that based on new information presented in a 2013 published paper by Robert Zink and others, the coastal California gnatcatcher cannot be distinguished taxonomically from other California gnatcatchers and, therefore, is not a listable entity under the ESA.

In December 2014, a 90-day finding was published in the *Federal Register*, indicating the petitioned action may be warranted and a status review was initiated. Based upon the best available scientific information, the Service determined the petitioned action is not warranted.

The 12-month finding may be viewed today at the [Federal Register Reading Room](#) and will officially publish on Aug. 31, 2016. All documents and supporting information for the 12-month finding will be available online at www.regulations.gov. In the search box enter Docket No. FWS-R8-ES-2014-0058 and click the "Search" button.

As part of the status review, the Service contracted with Amec Foster Wheeler to convene a panel of six independent, qualified scientists to review the information presented in the petition, along with other relevant information. The scientists were selected without input from the Service, but all have experience and expertise in the fields of molecular genetics, avian conservation genetics, avian systematics, conservation genetics, population genetics and avian molecular genetics.

The six scientists assessed the 2013 Zink *et al.* paper; other scientific literature pertaining to taxonomy of the coastal California gnatcatcher, including ecology, morphology, genetics and behavior; and information

received during the comment period that followed the publication of the 90-day petition finding. Their individual reports were reviewed by the Service.

Individual panelists and others that submitted comments on the 90-day finding pointed to weaknesses in the Zink et al. 2013 paper. Among the primary weaknesses of the research conducted by Zink et al. 2013 were the selection of genetic markers and lack of hypothesis testing. Specifically, the type of loci and analyses were not suited to identifying recent, intraspecific divergence. Panelists also indicated that a full suite of characteristics must be considered when looking at distinguishability of subspecies, including: morphology, ecological setting and genetic analysis.

Information obtained since a 2010 5-Year Review of the subspecies' status was also reviewed, and the Service determined the coastal California gnatcatcher should remain listed as threatened under the ESA.

Primary stressors on this subspecies include wildfire and vegetation type conversion of its native coastal sage scrub habitat to nonnative grassland which is not suitable for the bird. The subspecies also faces threats from grazing, fragmentation of its habitat, and climate change effects.

Although the panelists provided the Service with their individual analyses of the 2013 Zink *et al.* paper and other scientific information regarding taxonomy of the coastal California gnatcatcher, they were not asked to render individual recommendations regarding a delisting determination, nor were they asked to form a consensus regarding a delisting determination.

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