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News Release



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CRITICAL HABITAT WILL NOT BE DESIGNATED FOR COACHELLA VALLEY MILK-VETCH

Benefits of exclusion outweigh benefits of designating land as critical habitat

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published in today's *Federal Register* a final rule that excludes critical habitat for the Federally endangered Coachella Valley milk-vetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *coachellae*).

All of the lands containing physical or biological features that contribute to the conservation of Coachella Valley milk-vetch lie within the boundaries of conservation management plans, including the approved Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard Habitat Conservation Plan and the preferred alternative of the draft Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan.

The range of Coachella Valley milk-vetch is limited to the area from just east of Cabazon to north and west of Indio with additional limited occurrences in the Chuckwalla Valley along a 5-mile stretch of Highway 177 north of Desert Center.

Within its geographic range, Coachella Valley milk-vetch is found in loose, wind-blown or alluvial sands located on dunes or flats, and along disturbed margins of sandy washes.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act (ESA). It identifies geographic areas that contain features that contribute to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations or protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife management areas.

As a result of lawsuits filed by the California Native Plant Society, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Building Industry Legal Defense Foundation, the Service was required to propose critical habitat for the plant and to complete the rulemaking process by November 30, 2005.

A copy of the final rule and other information about Coachella Valley milk-vetch can be accessed on the Internet at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov>, or by contacting the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office at 760-431-9440.

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. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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