

NEWS RELEASE

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## **The Service Seeks Comment on the Proposed Critical Habitat Designation for Five Endangered Southeastern Fishes**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to designate approximately 224 river miles and 22 acres of critical habitat for the Cumberland darter, rush darter, yellowcheek darter, chucky madtom, and laurel dace. All five of these fishes were listed as endangered on August 9, 2011.

The ranges and abundance of these five fishes have seriously declined due to changes in their stream habitats resulting from mining, agriculture, reservoir construction, channelization, urban sprawl, pollution, sedimentation, and incompatible forestry practices.

Critical habitat is a term defined in the Endangered Species Act (ESA). It refers to specific geographic areas containing features essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations or protection. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, establish a refuge or preserve, and has no impact on private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits. It does not allow government or public access to private land.

At the time of listing, the Service assessed whether critical habitat would be prudent for these species, and found that it was; therefore, the Service is proposing critical habitat, as required by the Endangered Species Act.

Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

The proposed critical habitat for the Cumberland darter is located in McCreary and Whitley counties, Kentucky, as well as Campbell and Scott counties, Tennessee. Fifteen critical habitat units are proposed and include roughly 53 river miles.

For the rush darter, proposed critical habitat is located in Etowah, Jefferson, and Winston counties, Alabama. Eight critical habitat units are proposed and include approximately 27 river miles and 22 acres of land.

The proposed critical habitat for the yellowcheek darter is located in Cleburne, Searcy, Stone, and Van Buren counties, Arkansas. Four critical habitat units are proposed and include approximately 98 river miles.

Proposed critical habitat for the chunky madtom is located in Greene County, Tennessee where one unit is proposed and includes approximately 20 river miles.

The proposed critical habitat for the laurel dace is located in Bledsoe, Rhea, and Sequatchie counties, Tennessee. Six critical habitat units are proposed and include roughly 26 river miles.

Public comments on the proposed rule will be accepted until December 12, 2011.

Written comments on the proposal should be submitted on the *Federal eRulemaking Portal*: <http://www.regulations.gov> or to Public Comments Processing, Attn: **FWS-R4-ES-2011-0074**; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, MS 2042-PDM; Arlington, VA 22203. All comments will be posted on <http://www.regulations.gov>, including any personal information provided. Written requests for a public hearing will be accepted until November 28, 2011.

The complete proposal appears in the *Federal Register* today and can be found at the *Federal eRulemaking Portal*: <http://www.regulations.gov>. A copy also can be obtained by contacting Stephanie Chance, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 446 Neal Street, Cookeville, Tennessee 38501; phone 931/528-6481 x211.

The Service is preparing a draft economic analysis of the proposed critical habitat that will be released for public review and comment at a later date.

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. Visit the Service's websites at <http://www.fws.gov> or <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/>