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Service Identifies Habitat Essential to Five Endangered Southeastern Fishes

Information from the Public, Scientific Community Informs Final Decision

After reviewing and incorporating information from the public and the scientific community, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today identified approximately 228 river miles and 29 acres of critical habitat in, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama; and Arkansas, that contain aquatic habitat essential to the conservation of the Cumberland darter, rush darter, yellowcheek darter, Chucky madtom, and laurel dace, five species of fish protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The critical habitat designation includes areas in McCreary and Whitley counties, Kentucky; Campbell, Scott, Bledsoe, Rhea, Sequatchie, and Greene counties, Tennessee; Etowah, Jefferson, and Winston counties, Alabama; and Cleburne, Searcy, Stone, and Van Buren counties, Arkansas.

The Cumberland darter, rush darter, yellowcheek darter, Chucky madtom, and laurel dace are all species of fish that were first protected under the ESA in August 2011. This decision is part of the Service's efforts 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.

The ESA requires the Service to identify the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species, which the ESA terms "critical habitat." This identification helps federal agencies identify actions that may affect listed species or their habitat, and to work with the Service to avoid or minimize those impacts. Identifying this habitat also helps raise awareness of the habitat needs of imperiled species and focus the conservation efforts of other partners such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual landowners. The critical habitat designation for the rush darter coincides with about three river miles of critical habitat for the federally-listed vermilion darter in the Turkey Creek watershed in Jefferson County, Alabama.

Although non-federal lands are included in these areas, activities on these lands will not necessarily be affected, unless an activity is authorized, funded or carried out by a federal agency. The agency will need to work with the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to the species or to ensure actions do not take listed species or adversely modify critical habitat. In addition, public and private landowners still must comply with other provisions of the ESA to protect threatened and endangered species on their lands.

The Service relies on a number of voluntary, non-regulatory, conservation programs to provide willing landowners with assurances to protect them for the work they do on their lands. The Service's identification of these areas is based on the best scientific information available, and considered all relevant information provided by the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry and other interested parties during a 60-day comment period. In addition, the Service utilized an economic analysis to inform and refine its identification of this habitat. Only areas that contain habitat essential to the conservation of the species, and where the benefits of this habitat outweigh potential economic impacts, have been included.

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. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>

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