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News Release



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Federally listed aquatic species proposed for reintroduction into Tennessee's French Broad and Holston Rivers

As part of a broad effort to restore threatened and endangered species in the Tennessee River system, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to reintroduce 21 federally listed aquatic species – 15 mussels, 1 snail, and 5 fishes - into the French Broad and Holston Rivers in Tennessee. The proposed reintroductions will occur in the main stem of each river beginning at least 10 river miles below Douglas and Cherokee dams.

“The reintroduction of listed species into restored historical habitat has been an important recovery tool for listed species,” said Sam D. Hamilton, the Service’s Southeast Regional Director. “Also, because these species are being reintroduced as nonessential experimental populations, there will be no significant impacts on public or private use of the French Broad and Holston Rivers or their watersheds.”

Designations as non-essential experimental populations exempt anyone who accidentally kills or harms these animals from being in violation of the law, provided that the “take” occurs as part of an otherwise lawful activity, such as boating, fishing, or wading. Similarly, federal or federally funded projects would not be required to be altered or stopped to protect these species.

The mussels included in this proposal are the Appalachian monkeyface, birdwing pearl mussel, cracking pearl mussel, Cumberland bean, Cumberland monkeyface, dromedary pearl mussel, orange-foot pimpleback, white wartyback, Cumberlandian combshell, fine-rayed pigtoe, fanshell, oyster mussel, ring pink, rough pigtoe, and shiny pigtoe. The other aquatic species included in the proposal are the Anthony’s riversnail and five fishes: duskytail darter, pygmy madtom, slender chub, spotfin chub, and yellowfin madtom.

The lower French Broad and Holston rivers once supported a diverse fish, snail, and mussel fauna, possibly as many as 85 mussel species and subspecies, accounting for approximately 65 percent of the mussel diversity previously known to exist in the entire Tennessee River system. Of this once-rich mussel fauna, 7 species are extinct, and 15 mussels, 1 aquatic snail, and 5 fishes (the same species that are in this proposed rule) are federally listed but have disappeared from these river reaches. The only federally listed mussel still occurring in the proposed NEP area is the endangered pink mucket; it still occurs in both the lower French Broad and lower Holston Rivers. The pink mucket is not one of the 15 mussel species we are proposing to reintroduce under this NEP.

Although many mussels and some fish species have been eliminated from these river reaches, suitable

physical habitat still remains. The Tennessee Valley Authority and other federal and state natural resources agencies, industries, and local municipalities have done much to improve water quality in these rivers. Consequently, fish fauna is rebounding, aquatic snail populations are expanding, and non-endangered mussels and snails released into the lower French Broad River to test the area's suitability for transplants are doing well. In addition, based on the results of recent studies and observations by knowledgeable scientists, these river reaches appear to provide potential habitat for the reintroduction of their historical aquatic fauna.

Conservation Fisheries, Inc., based in Knoxville, Tennessee, has reintroduced the duskytail darter, smoky madtom, spotfin chub, and yellowfin madtom into Abrams Creek within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Blount County, Tennessee and Tellico River in Monroe County, Tennessee. There is evidence that all four species are becoming reestablished in Abrams Creek. The Tellico River reintroductions began in 2003 and early survey results are positive. In addition, CFI surveyed and determined that the lower French Broad and Holston Rivers contained potential suitable habitat to reintroduce all five fishes in this proposal.

Support for Conservation Fisheries, Inc.'s reintroduction efforts has come from the Service, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Tennessee Valley Authority, and Tennessee Aquarium. The reintroduction effort in lower French Broad and Holston Rivers, an extension of these other recovery projects, was developed at the request of the Executive Director of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

This action, published today in the *Federal Register* (volume 71, number 113, pages 34195-34230), was developed at the request of the Executive Director of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. The proposed reintroductions are part of a larger recovery effort that the Service and its state, federal, and private partners are conducting for these species. The goal of this and related recovery programs for these mollusks and fishes in other watersheds is to recover them to the point where they can be removed from the federal list of *Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants*.

Non-essential experimental population status is a special category under the Endangered Species Act. It allows for reintroduction and protection, and its requirements are far less stringent than those for species that are not in this category. For example, for non-essential experimental populations, the Act requires that a federal agency outside a National Wildlife Refuge or National Park confer with the Service on actions the agency finds likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the reintroduced species. But the agency is not required by the Act to halt or change an action – although it would be required to do so for a federally threatened or endangered species that is not a non-essential experimental population. The Service, therefore, does not expect the reintroductions to have an impact on these agencies or their activities.

Questions regarding these reintroductions should be addressed to Timothy Merritt at the Tennessee Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 446 Neal Street, Cookeville, Tennessee 38501, telephone: 931/528-6481, ext. 211, fax 931/528-7075.

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 governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

