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Southeastern Orchid Placed on Federal Threatened and Endangered Species List

Cookeville, Tenn. – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is adding the white fringeless orchid to the federal list of threatened and endangered species, as a threatened species to protect and conserve the rare plant.

While the orchid is found in six Southern states – Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, and Mississippi - populations are small, isolated, and face a wide array of threats across their range. Because of the threat of collection, the Service is not designating critical habitat for this plant.

The listing follows the September 2015 proposal to protect the orchid. The Service has considered the orchid a candidate for the threatened and endangered species list since 1999, and in 2004 was petitioned by an outside group to add it to the list of protected species.

“Because of its small populations across six states and myriad threats, conserving the white fringeless orchid comes with challenges,” said Cindy Dohner, the Southeast Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “We hope our partners will rally to recover the plant before its situation becomes more critical.”

The ultimate goal is to recover the orchid, so that it no longer needs the protective measures of the ESA. The Service will now develop a recovery plan for the species and work cooperatively with partners to conserve its habitat. The Service’s Southeast Region through an aggressive At-Risk species conservation effort is strengthening existing partnerships, building new ones, and completing a range of conservation actions including better surveys and monitoring to determine that 72 species across the region do not need the ESA’s protection. As a result, to date, another dozen species’ status has improved from endangered to threatened and in some cases like the Louisiana black bear have been removed from the list and recovered.

While the threatened status means the orchid is not facing imminent extinction, low numbers have been observed at more than half the orchid’s known locations, and threats are present throughout the plant’s range – leading the Service to conclude that it is likely to face extinction in the foreseeable future.

There are 57 known occurrences of the orchid, spanning six southeastern states, with 33 located entirely, or in part, on lands owned or managed by local, state, or federal governments. The orchid’s distribution is concentrated in the Cumberland Plateau of Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and extends into South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi, with isolated populations scattered across the Blue Ridge Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal Plain. Most occurrences are

in forested wetlands, though, some are in utility or transportation rights-of-way, where the plant sometimes thrives in the well-lit, open conditions. Finally, less than 20 percent of occurrences have ever been observed to have more than 100 flowering plants during a single growing season. Left unprotected, the plant's range and abundance will likely continue to diminish.

Compounding the orchid's plight is the fact that it appears to rely on a limited number of butterflies and a single species of fungus to complete its life cycle, making it susceptible to anything that threatens these creatures as well. Like most terrestrial orchids, white fringeless orchid has small, wind-dispersed seeds that lack nutrient reserves, so the young plants depend on a fungus to enhance sprouting and promote early growth. Though the orchid can self-pollinate, it has only three known external pollinators, all butterflies – the silver spotted skipper, spicebush swallowtail, and eastern tiger swallowtail.

Habitat destruction and modification from development, forestry practices, alteration of water flow, such as beaver dam removal, right-of-way maintenance, and invasive species also have resulted in the plant's disappearance from 10 sites and affected dozens of others. Collection is an historical and ongoing problem. Hundreds of specimens were collected in the 1940s. A 1992 status survey for the species included reports of two nurseries collecting white fringeless orchid plants for resale. More recently, evidence of collecting was observed at a Georgia site in 2004; and in 2014, biologists from the Service and the State of Tennessee documented the loss of 52 plants to collecting from a roadside occurrence in Tennessee.

The orchid's listing is part of the Service's effort to implement a court-approved work plan addressing this listing workload and resolving a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing program.

The Service's final rule listing the orchid as threatened appears in the September 13, 2016 *Federal Register*. Protection for this plant under the ESA becomes effective on October 13, 2016, 30 days after the rule is published in the *Federal Register*. For threatened plants, it is illegal under the ESA to take, damage, or destroy any such plants, from areas under federal jurisdiction or in knowing violation of any law or regulation of any State, or to possess, import, export or conduct interstate or international commerce without authorization from the Service. The ESA also requires all federal agencies to ensure actions they authorize, fund, or undertake do not jeopardize the existence of listed species.

The Service initially proposed to protect the orchid and sought public comment on September 15, 2015, and again sought public input on April 14, 2016. All comments received are posted at <http://www.regulations.gov> and are addressed in the final listing rule. For more information about this plant and the final rule visit <http://www.fws.gov/cookeville> or the *Federal Register* at <http://www.regulations.gov>, docket number FWS-R4-ES-0129.

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