Questions and Answers
Pearl darter proposed for listing as threatened

1. What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposing?

The Service is proposing to list the pearl darter, a small fish, as threatened on the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, which would provide it with protections under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Threatened status means that the Service believes this fish may become endangered throughout most or all of its current range if steps are not taken to conserve the darter and its habitat.

2. Why is the Service proposing to list the pearl darter as threatened?

The pearl darter has been a candidate for federal listing since 1999. The Service was petitioned to address candidate species and the pearl darter is one of several under the multi-district legislation settlement. After assessing the best available scientific and commercial data regarding the pearl darter's status, and considering the present and future threats to the species, the Service recommends proposing the pearl darter for listing as a threatened species.

3. What are the threats to the pearl darter?

The primary threat to the pearl darter is water quality degradation caused by pollution.

4. What other threats, besides water quality degradation, make the pearl darter vulnerable to becoming endangered?

The pearl darter's localized distribution, apparent low population numbers, in addition to indications of low genetic diversity within the species, makes it more vulnerable to catastrophic events such as oil or chemical spills.

5. What is a pearl darter?

The pearl darter is a freshwater fish measuring about two and a half inches in length. It has a blunt snout, a horizontal mouth, and large eyes situated high on its head.

6. What are the pearl darter's habitat requirements and where does it live?

Pearl darters have been collected from gravel riffles and rock outcrops; deep runs over gravel and sand pools below shallow riffles; swift, shallow water over firm gravel and cobble in mid-river channels; and swift water near brush piles.

7. What are the pearl darter's historical and current ranges?

Historically, the pearl darter was found in 16 parishes and counties in northeast Louisiana and southern Mississippi. Today, this darter's range has been reduced by 57 percent, with the last collections of the pearl darter dating more than 40 years ago in the Pearl River system that spans both states.

Now, the pearl darter only lives in the Pascagoula River drainage of southeast Mississippi, occurring sporadically within about 279 miles within the Pascagoula, Bouie, Leaf, Chickasawhay, and Chunky rivers, and Okatoma and Black creeks.

8. How many pearl darters are left?

Current population estimates are not available for the pearl darter. Reproducing populations have been documented in recent years in the Leaf and Chickasawhay rivers and populations in the Pascagoula River appear stable.

9. Are there plans to gather more information on the pearl darter?

Yes. Researchers with the University of Southern Mississippi, along with biologists from the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science are re-surveying historical and current pearl darter locations and will continue their efforts through the fall of 2016.

10. What kinds of activities could help conserve the pearl darter?

- Don't dump chemicals into streams and rivers and do report spills to state environmental protection agencies.
- During timber harvest, construction or other projects, implement best management practices for sediment and erosion control.
- Start a watershed group or assist in stream and water quality monitoring efforts.
- Plant trees and other native woody vegetation along stream banks to help restore and preserve water quality.
- Replace or remove culverts and low-water bridge crossings that are barriers to passage for these species, fishes, and other aquatic organisms.

11. Why is the pearl darter's proposed status threatened instead of endangered?

The pearl darter is not in immediate danger of extinction. Though, the overall range has been reduced substantially, there are indications that the pearl darter is maintaining reproducing populations in portions of the river system. In addition, the threats acting on this species' habitat (see Q 2-4) are having more of a more localized impact on the habitat. For example, water quality degradation is not as pervasive within areas protected with BMPS, such as those within state-managed wildlife management areas and Nature Conservancy preserves. However despite these protective measures, the pearl darter is in danger of becoming endangered throughout all or some of its range in the foreseeable future. Therefore, the Service is proposing to list the darter as threatened.

12. How can the public submit comments on the Service's proposal to list the pearl darter as threatened?

Written comments on the pearl darter's proposed listing as threatened will be accepted on or before November 21, 2016. Comments submitted electronically using the Federal eRulemaking Portal must be received by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on the closing date.

Comments may be submitted by one of the two following methods:

(1) *Electronically*: Go to the Federal eRulemaking Portal: *http://www.regulations.gov* In the Search box, enter FWS–R4–ES–2016–0037, which is the docket number for this rulemaking. Then, in the Search panel on the left side of the screen, under the Document Type heading, click on the Proposed Rules link to locate this document. You may submit a comment by clicking on "Comment Now!"
(2) *By hard copy*: Submit by U.S. mail or hand-delivery to: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS–R4–ES–2016–0037; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041-3803.

Requests for a public hearing must be made in writing by November 7, 2016, to: Stephen Ricks, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mississippi Ecological Services Field Office, 6578 Dogwood Parkway, Jackson, Mississippi 39213, phone 601-321-1122 or by facsimile 601-965-4340. Persons who use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 800–877–8339.