

September 20, 2016

Contact: Connie Dickard, 601-321-1121, connie_dickard@fws.gov

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes to List Pearl Darter as Threatened

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined the pearl darter is likely to be at risk of becoming endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Therefore, the Service proposes to add this small, snub-nosed fish to the list of protected wildlife as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

At the same time, the Service has concluded that critical habitat cannot be determined because additional information is needed to complete the required analyses of potential impacts from a proposed designation. The pearl darter is currently listed as endangered in Mississippi by the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks.

“The Southeast Region's rich biodiversity is like no other in the nation,” said Cynthia Dohner, Southeast Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “We need to conserve wildlife and their habitats for future generations because this conservation can also help ensure cleaner streams and rivers for people to use and enjoy as well.”

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 over 40 years ago in the Pearl River system that spans both states.

Currently, 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. Reproducing populations have been documented in recent years in the Leaf and Chickasawhay rivers and populations in the Pascagoula River appear stable. However, collections have been sparse in the remaining drainages, and consequently, the pearl darter's present population status in those drainages is mostly unknown.

The Service assessed the best available scientific and commercial data regarding its status, along with present and future threats to the species and recommends listing the pearl darter as threatened. The primary danger to this fish is water quality degradation caused by pollution.

The pearl darter occupies much of the same area as two other listed species, the threatened Gulf sturgeon and yellow-blotched map turtle. Several state-owned wildlife management areas and lands owned by The Nature Conservancy protect a small portion of the shoreline within the darter's range, as well as parcels of uplands within the drainage basin.

The Service continues to work closely with local partners to gather data on the pearl darter. Researchers with the University of Southern Mississippi, along with biologists from the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, are presently conducting additional surveys of historic and current pearl darter locations and plan to intensify efforts through the fall.

The pearl darter has been a candidate for listing since 1999. The proposed listing for the pearl darter is part of the Service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan under a Multi-District Listing Agreement aimed at addressing a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA listing program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce a litigation-driven workload. For more information, please see <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation>

The public is invited to provide new information on the pearl darter, as well as make comments on its proposed listing. 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.

Only send comments by the methods described above. All comments will be posted on <http://www.regulations.gov> including any personal information provided.

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.

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