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News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service extends Endangered Species Act protection to rare fish

It has been more than 40 years since the pearl darter – a small, snub-nosed fish – lived in the Pearl River system in Louisiana and Mississippi. Today, it is only found in the Pascagoula River system in Mississippi and poor water quality is taking a toll on the tiny fish.

To safeguard this species, the Service has added the pearl darter to the list of protected wildlife under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Following a rigorous evaluation of the best science available on the fish, it is listed as a threatened species, which means it is considered likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. The pearl darter's listing will help spur attention to the threats it faces and focus resources and partnerships on its recovery. The listing will become effective on October 20, 2017, 30 days after publication of this final determination in the *Federal Register*.

“In this review we note the improvements and progress land and timber managers are making in Mississippi by incorporating certified best management practices into their operations,” said Mike Oetker, acting regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast region. “They help minimize impacts on the darter's habitat, ensure cleaner water, and keep working lands working.”

In addition to nonpoint-source pollution (land-surface and stormwater runoff), point-source pollution, such as wastewater discharged from treatment plants or industrial sites, has also increased contaminants into drainages of the pearl darter's range. Catastrophic events including oil and chemical spills are concerns too because of oil wells, gas lines, and railways throughout this fish's limited habitat. The pearl darter is also vulnerable due to its small population numbers and documented low-genetic diversity, which reduces its overall genetic fitness.

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) considers the pearl darter endangered in the state. Just recently, MDWFP completed population surveys for the darter verifying its presence in the Pascagoula River drainages and confirming its absence from the Pearl River drainages.

The pearl darter and its habitat are afforded some protection from water quality degradation under the Clean Water Act and the Mississippi Water Pollution Control Law. Two state-managed wildlife management areas, plus lands owned by The Nature Conservancy, overlap the pearl darter's range providing protection from habitat conversion to a small portion of its habitat. The pearl darter also may receive some additional protection from water quality improvements where its range overlaps two other

listed species, the threatened Gulf sturgeon and yellow-blotched map turtle.

Today, this darter occurs in scattered locations within the Pascagoula, Leaf, Chickasawhay, Chunky, and Bouie rivers; and the Black and Okatoma creeks. Reproducing populations have been documented in recent years in the Leaf and Chickasawhay rivers, and populations in the Pascagoula River appear stable. However, collection efforts indicate low numbers within Bouie and Chunky rivers and the Black and Okatoma creeks.

Public comments and information received over the last year during the proposed listing process for the pearl darter, as well as supporting documentation used in preparing this final decision, are available online at regulations.gov. To access this information, go to the search box and enter FWS-R4-ES-2016-0037, which is the docket number for this decision.

The final listing for the pearl darter is part of the Service's efforts to complete the implementation of a listing work plan as a result of the multi-district litigation settlement reached by the Service and two environmental groups. For more information, please see <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation>.

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