

Peer Review Plan for Virgin Spinedace (*Lepidomeda mollispinis*) Species Status Assessment

Estimated Timeline of the Peer Review:

- **Draft document to be sent to peer reviewers:** March, 2021
- **Peer review initiated:** March, 2021
- **Peer review to be completed by:** April, 2021
- **Determination regarding species' status expected:** The Species Status Assessment (SSA) will inform a decision of whether or not to propose listing the Virgin spinedace. This decision document will be completed and delivered to the Federal Register by September 30, 2021.

About the Peer Review Process:

In accordance with our July 1, 1994 peer review policy (59 FR 34270), the Office of Management and Budget's December 16, 2004 Final Information Quality Bulletin for Peer Review, and our August 22, 2016 memorandum clarifying the peer review process, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will solicit independent scientific review of the information contained in our SSA. The Service will nominate potential peer reviewers.

We will consider the following criteria for any potential nomination:

- **Expertise:** The reviewer should have knowledge of Virgin Spinedace, or of a similar species, or of its habitat in the Virgin River watershed.
- **Independence:** The reviewer should not be employed by the Service. In rare cases, a Service employee may be a valuable expert and may be used as a peer reviewer, provided that the employee is independent of ongoing activities related to delisting the species. If a Service employee is selected, we will still solicit peer review from at least three other experts. Academic, consulting, or government scientists should have sufficient independence from the Service if the government supports their work.
- **Objectivity:** The reviewer should be recognized by his or her peers as being objective, open-minded, and thoughtful. In addition, the reviewer should be comfortable sharing his or her knowledge and perspectives and openly identifying his or her knowledge gaps.
- **Conflict of Interest:** The reviewer should not have any financial or other interest that conflicts or that could impair his or her objectivity or create an unfair competitive advantage. If an otherwise qualified reviewer has an unavoidable conflict of interest, the Service may publicly disclose the conflict.

While expertise is the primary consideration, we will select peer reviewers (considering, but not limited to, these nominations) that add to a diversity of scientific perspectives relevant to the Virgin spinedace. We will not be providing financial compensation to peer reviewers. We will solicit reviews from at least three qualified experts.

We will provide each peer reviewer with information explaining their role, instructions for fulfilling that role, and the draft SSA. The purpose of seeking independent peer review is to ensure use of the best scientific and commercial information available and to ensure and maximize the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of the information upon which the SSA is based, as well as to ensure that reviews by recognized experts are incorporated into the final SSA.

Peer reviewers will be advised that they are not to provide advice on policy. Rather, they should focus their review on identifying and characterizing scientific uncertainties. Peer reviewers will be asked to answer questions pertaining to the logic of our assumptions, arguments, and conclusions and to provide any other relevant comments, criticisms, or thoughts.

Specific questions the reviewers will be asked include the following:

1. Is our description and analysis of the biology, habitat, population trends, and historic and current distribution of the species accurate?
2. Does the SSA provide accurate and adequate review and analysis of the taxonomy of the species?
3. Are there any significant oversights, omissions, or inconsistencies in our SSA?
4. Are the conclusions we reach logical and supported by the evidence we provide?
5. Did we include all the necessary and pertinent literature to support our assumptions/arguments/conclusions?

Peer reviewers will provide individual, written responses to the Service. Peer reviewers will be advised that their reviews, including their names and affiliations, will (1) be included in the administrative record for the SSA, and (2) be available to the public upon request once all reviews are completed. We will summarize and respond to the issues raised by the peer reviewers before releasing the SSA.

About Public Participation

The peer review process will be initiated shortly. We strongly encourage that public comments on the approach of this peer review be submitted by April, 2021, in order to allow enough time for processing and consideration. However, we will accept comments on the peer review plan throughout the SSA process. The SSA will inform a decision of whether or not to propose listing the Virgin spinedace. This decision document will be completed and delivered to the Federal Register by September 30, 2021.

Contact

For more information, contact Alex Kasdin at alexandra_kasdin@fws.gov (303-236-4419).