

NEWS RELEASE

U. S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE - REGION 1

911 N.E. 11th AVENUE
PORTLAND, OREGON 97232-4181

IDAHO - NEVADA - CALIFORNIA - WASHINGTON - OREGON -
HAWAII AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

C-G

91-38

Refer: Cynthia U. Barry 916/978-4866 (Sacramento, CA)
503/231-6121 (Portland, OR)

For Release: September 27, 1991

**FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES THREATENED STATUS,
WITH CRITICAL HABITAT, FOR DELTA SMELT**

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed designation of the delta smelt, a small fish of the Upper Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in northern California, as a threatened species. Today's action begins a one-year review period during which public comment about the proposed listing will be sought before a final decision is made.

The delta smelt, a species requiring a mixture of fresh and salt water in which to live and reproduce, is threatened primarily by loss of its habitat. Contributing to this decline are the diversion of freshwater from river systems supplying water to areas where it lives, California's recent prolonged drought, the presence of non-native aquatic species which disrupt the smelt's food chain, and water quality deterioration which can harm young fish.

In making today's announcement, Fish and Wildlife Service Pacific Regional Director Marvin Plenert said a technical work group, consisting of Service and outside biologists, is being assembled to review all available scientific information concerning the delta smelt and its habitat.

"Before any final decision is made on this proposal, we will compile and review the best information available regarding the status of the delta smelt population and the highly complex hydrology of the Delta," Plenert said. "In the meantime, our close working relationships with the Bureau of Reclamation in California and the California Department of Water Resources to conserve the delta smelt will continue and will be directed at mitigating any further impacts to the smelt."

"We recognize the statewide interest in this proposed listing," Service Director John Turner said, "and we will work very closely with all interested parties in California to determine and bring about the best and most balanced measures to meet the needs of this species."

Today's proposed rule includes a proposed critical habitat designation for the delta smelt that considers all water and submerged lands below the high tide mark in Suisun Bay, the length of Montezuma Slough, portions of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers and portions of the Delta and adjacent waters.

Critical habitat is defined by the Endangered Species Act as those areas containing the physical and biological features essential to the conservation of a species. Critical habitat often has been widely misunderstood as equivalent to setting aside a sanctuary for a species. The Endangered Species Act requires that, after a final listing, Federal agencies consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service when actions they might take could affect an endangered species, or adversely modify its critical habitat. In cases where actions would harm a species, the Act requires the Service to work with the involved agency to develop "reasonable and prudent" alternatives. In practice, this often means proposed projects can be carried out if modified to avoid jeopardy to the species.

The delta smelt is a small fish, rarely more than 3 inches long, with a nearly translucent body and a steely-blue sheen on its sides. It is the only smelt native to California and the only native species that spends its entire life in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Historically occurring from Suisun Bay and upstream to the towns of Isleton on the Sacramento River and Mossdale on the San Joaquin River, delta smelt are now found primarily in the Sacramento River channel of the Delta. The species is now considered rare in Suisun Bay and virtually absent from Suisun Marsh where they once were seasonally common. Population estimates provided from the California Department of Fish and Game and the University of California at Davis indicate the species has declined by almost 90 percent over the last 20 years, from 2.6 million fish to about 280,000. Although the current population has remained stable over the past 5 years, it has done so at very low levels, and with little apparent recovery occurring. The California Fish and Game Commission, in view of this evidence, has requested further studies.

The Endangered Species Act provides for a 6-month extension of the one-year review period if there is evidence of scientific disagreement.

The delta smelt has adapted to living in the seawater-freshwater mixing zone of brackish and freshwater areas where it depends entirely on zooplankton for food. It lives only one year and spawns in freshwater between February and June. Its eggs and larvae require freshwater at low salinity levels to survive during this time. As a result, they are vulnerable to changing water conditions.

The annual export of approximately 6 million acre-feet of fresh water away from the estuary by Federal and state projects, with an additional 2 to 3 million acre-feet of water diverted by private Delta water users, has allowed the intrusion of higher salinity seawater into Delta marshes. This has restricted the delta smelt's spawning and larval nursery areas to less favorable river channel habitat. Additionally, the rates at which water is exported from the Delta by the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project pumping stations cause some Delta channel waters to reverse and flow upstream, which can seriously disrupt fish migrations and cause larval and juvenile fish to die.

The Service identified the delta smelt as a likely candidate for proposed listing in 1989, when the fish was listed as a "category 1" candidate species. This designation is used for advance warnings on species for which the Service has substantial information to support a listing proposal, although other listing actions preclude listing action on the candidate. Generally, category 1 candidate species are likely to be officially proposed for listing as endangered or threatened, and should be considered in environmental planning.

Under the Endangered Species Act, an "endangered" species is one in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A "threatened" species is one likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.

On June 29, 1990, the Service received a petition from the California-Nevada Chapter of the American Fisheries Society to list the delta smelt as endangered, with critical habitat. In December 1990, the Service determined that substantial information had been presented and that listing may be warranted. A status review was initiated at that time.