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U. S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE - REGION 1

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CRITICAL HABITAT FOR LEAST BELL'S VIREO
PROPOSED BY FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced a proposal to designate critical habitat for the least Bell's vireo, a small songbird that lives along rivers in southern California and Baja California, Mexico that was listed by the Federal Government as an endangered species in 1986.

The proposal includes 10 areas amounting to 48,020 acres along streams in the counties of Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego. The total area of these six counties exceeds 26.5 million acres.

The Service first proposed critical habitat for the least Bell's vireo in 1986. This revised proposal will enable the Service to gather and review updated information on the species before making a final critical habitat designation.

"Critical habitat" signifies habitat essential to the conservation of a species listed as endangered or threatened, and alerts agencies conducting projects in the area to the significance of the habitat. While critical habitat designation does not establish sanctuaries or prohibit projects in these areas, Federal projects could be subject to additional review, as could private projects under Federal license or sponsorship.

Approximately 500 breeding pairs of least Bell's vireos are estimated to remain in the United States, with several hundred pairs judged to exist in Mexico. Nearly 90 percent of known breeding pairs nest within the areas the Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing as critical habitat, chiefly lower elevation streamside thickets in southern California. The California Department of Fish and Game listed the least Bell's vireo as endangered in 1980.

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"This proposal renews the public dialogue on what habitat protections may be necessary to conserve the species," says Richard Smith, deputy director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "The Service has completed its initial economic analysis examining the impacts of the proposal on all landowners - Federal, state, county, and private.

"Public comments and full public hearings will enable us to consider the possibility of refining the critical habitat proposal to minimize or eliminate the economic impact on private landowners while meeting our legal requirement to protect the species," Smith said. He reiterated this is only a proposed rule, and the public comment period, including the hearing schedule, is of vital importance in crafting the final designation, to be published in January 1993.

Public comment regarding the Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to designate critical habitat for the least Bell's vireo will be taken through October 31, 1992, and should be sent to the Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southern California Field Station, 2730 Loker Avenue West, Carlsbad, California 92008. At least two public hearings will be held to receive comment on the proposal. Hearing dates and locations will be announced at a later date. A more complete description of the Service's proposal appears in the August 7, 1992, Federal Register.

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