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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes to Protect Rare Mussel in Suwannee River Basin

While its population appears to have stabilized in the mainstem of the Suwannee River, the Suwannee moccasinshell mussel is declining across the rest of its range and should be protected as a threatened species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

Its decline is the result of pollution, sedimentation, and reduced flows in the Suwannee river basin.

The Suwannee moccasinshell is a freshwater mussel only found in the Suwannee River Basin in Florida and Georgia. The primary reason for the species' decline is the degradation of its habitat due to polluted runoff from agricultural lands, discharges from industrial and municipal wastewater sources and mining operations, and decreased flows because of groundwater extraction and drought. In other portions of its range, sedimentation also has impacted its habitat.

"The Suwannee moccasinshell's decline should serve as a warning to us to take notice of declining clean water in these rivers," said Cindy Dohner, the Service's Southeast Regional Director. "I know Americans value clean water. Mussels are indicators of how clean the water is. A healthy river system means good fishing and clean water for fish, migratory birds, other wildlife, and people."

It is currently known to live in the Suwannee River main channel and the lower Santa Fe River in Florida. An evaluation of historical and recent collection data shows the Suwannee moccasinshell's range has declined in recent decades. It may be extirpated from the Withlacoochee River in Georgia and Florida, and its range and abundance have clearly declined in the Santa Fe River system in Florida, where it is now found only in the lower portion of the Santa Fe River mainstem to exceedingly low numbers.

The Suwannee moccasinshell continues to survive throughout most of its known range in the Suwannee River mainstem, but its numbers are lower now than a few decades ago. Despite their low abundance, populations in the Suwannee River mainstem presently appear to be stable.

There are already other endangered or threatened species in or near the moccasinshell's habitat. The threatened Gulf sturgeon has critical habitat in the main channel Suwannee and Withlacoochee Rivers and the endangered Oval pigtoe mussel has critical habitat in the Santa Fe and New Rivers.

The proposed listing of the moccasinshell is part of the Service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan aimed at addressing a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA listing program. To learn more about the Service's work plan for 2015, please visit

<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation>

The public is invited to submit comments on this proposal through a 60-day comment period ending December 7, 2015. Comments and information may be submitted one of two ways:

1) *Electronically*: Go to the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. In the Search box, enter FWS–R4–ES–2015–0142, 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–2015–0142; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA, 22041-3803. All relevant information received during the open comment period from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, and any other interested parties, will be considered and addressed in the Service’s final listing determination for the Suwannee moccasinshell.

Requests for a public hearing must be made in writing within 45 days by November 20, 2015. To request a public hearing, please contact Dr. Catherine Phillips, Project Leader, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Field Office, 1601 Balboa Avenue, Panama City, Florida, 32405, telephone 850-769-0552.

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