

News Release

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Public Comments Sought on Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Proposed Palmyra Atoll Restoration Project

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today the availability of a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for public review and comment. The draft document describes a range of alternatives for eliminating nonnative black rats from the Palmyra Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to protect and restore the unique species and habitats at Palmyra Atoll. The public comment period is open for 45 days.

Palmyra Atoll NWR is located in the Northern Line Islands, approximately 1,000 miles south of Honolulu, Hawai'i, in the Central Pacific Ocean. The Refuge was established in 2001 to protect, restore, and enhance migratory birds, coral reefs, and threatened and endangered species in their natural setting and is managed in coordination with The Nature Conservancy, which owns the largest island in the atoll and manages a preserve and research station there.

Palmyra Atoll consists of approximately 25 small, heavily vegetated islets surrounding 3 central lagoons. Habitats consist of 618 acres of land and 15,512 acres of lagoons and shallow reefs. The Refuge's boundary extends seaward 12 nautical miles, encompassing 515,232 acres. Palmyra's terrestrial habitats support one of the largest remaining tropical coastal strand forests in the U.S. Pacific Islands. A diverse land crab fauna including the coconut crab, ecologically intact predator-dominated fish assemblages, and large seabird populations are also important resources of the refuge.

Rats are severely degrading the terrestrial ecosystem of this important atoll by preying on seabird eggs and chicks and native land crabs, and directly competing with native species for limited food resources. Rats also limit native plant recruitment and disperse the seeds of introduced, invasive plants. The proposed project is expected to result in biological diversity benefits for seabirds, plants, native rainforest, terrestrial invertebrates, and other components of the Atoll's terrestrial ecosystem. The benefit of this conservation action is significant because Palmyra is the only moist tropical atoll ecosystem in the Central Pacific with strong protections that is not experiencing exploitation of both marine and terrestrial natural resources by burgeoning human populations. Without intervention, introduced rats may push some seabird colonies to extinction. Rats are likely preventing eight seabird species from successfully nesting on Palmyra.

The draft EIS was prepared in accordance with National Environmental Policy Act requirements. Public input was sought prior to the development of the draft EIS during a public scoping process from January

14 to March 1, 2010. Comments received were considered, evaluated, and incorporated as appropriate into the draft EIS.

The Service will consider all comments received by April 11, 2011, but is particularly interested in receiving additional scientific information such as effects of the various methods proposed, efficacy of the proposed monitoring program, or impacts to human activities. All comments will be carefully considered during development of the final EIS.

Comments can be sent by one of the following methods:

- *Email:* pacific_reefs@fws.gov. Include "Palmyra rat project" in subject line.
- *Fax:* Attn: Dr. Elizabeth Flint, 808.792.9586.
- *U.S. Mail:* Pacific Reefs National Wildlife Refuge Complex, 300 Ala Moana Blvd., Room 5-231, Honolulu, HI 96850.

Copies of the draft EIS may be obtained via the Service's Website at <http://www.fws.gov/palmyraatoll/>, or by contacting the Pacific Reefs National Wildlife Refuge Complex at 808.792.9550. For further information contact: Dr. Elizabeth Flint at 808.792.9553.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.