

FY24 Peer Review Plan for the Species Status Assessment Reports of Barrens Darter and Ghost Orchid

About the Document

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) intends to seek peer review of Species Status Assessment (SSA) reports for the following species:

Title: Draft Species Status Assessment Report for the Barrens darter
Draft Species Status Assessment Report for the ghost orchid

Estimated Timeline of Peer Review: 2024-2025

Determination: The SSA reports being peer reviewed will inform a decision on whether these species warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act. If we determine that the species warrants listing, we will publish a proposed rule to list the species and designate critical habitat with appropriate opportunities for public review and comment.

About the Peer Review Process

In accordance with our July 1, 1994 peer review policy (59 FR 34270), the Service's August 22, 2016 Director's Memo on the Peer Review Process, and the Office of Management and Budget's December 16, 2004 Final Information Quality Bulletin for Peer Review, we, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will solicit independent scientific reviews of the information contained in our SSA report for these species. For proposed rules that are not informed by SSA reports, we will solicit independent scientific reviews of the proposed rules. The purpose of seeking independent peer review is to ensure use of the best scientific and commercial information available and to ensure and to maximize the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of the information upon which the report or rule is based, as well as to ensure that reviews by recognized experts are incorporated into the SSA process or rules, as appropriate.

The Service will request peer review from three or more independent experts. We will consider the following criteria:

- **Expertise:** The reviewer should have knowledge of or experience with the species biology, habitats in which they occur, and/or threats to the species.
- **Independence:** The reviewer should not be employed by the Service. 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, the Service will select peer reviewers (considering, but not limited to, these selections) that add to a diversity of scientific perspectives. We will not be providing financial compensation to peer reviewers. We will solicit reviews from at least three qualified experts.

The Service will provide each peer reviewer with information explaining their role and instructions for fulfilling that role, the SSA report or rule, and a conflict-of-interest form. Peer reviewers will be asked to comment specifically on the quality of the scientific information and analyses and whether the best available information was used or relied on in the document; identify oversights, omissions, and inconsistencies; provide advice on reasonableness of judgments made from the scientific evidence; help ensure that scientific uncertainties are identified and characterized; provide advice on the overall strengths and limitations of the scientific data used in the document; and inform us of any scientific information that we did not use. Peer reviewers will be advised that they are not to provide advice on policy.

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 decisional record of our determinations; 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 in the record supporting our determinations. A decision on whether or not any of these species warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act is by expected during 2024-2025.

About Public Participation

This peer review plan is made available to allow the public to monitor our compliance with the Office of Management and Budget's Final Information Quality Bulletin for Peer Review. The SSA along with the final decision document will be made available to the public through a news release, direct mail to interested parties, and posts on Service websites (with solicitations for public comment if we prepare a proposed rule to list the species as endangered or threatened and designate critical habitat). If appropriate, the Service will publish a final listing and designation of critical habitat following consideration of all comments received from the public.

Contact

For more information, contact:

Ghost orchid: Lourdes Mena, Florida Ecological Services Office, telephone: 904-731-3134, email: lourdes_mena@fws.gov.

Barrens darter: Dan Elbert, Tennessee Ecological Services Field Office; telephone: 571-461-8964, email: daniel_elbert@fws.gov.