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Conserving the Southeast's At-Risk Species

“Private landowners are wonderful stewards of the Southeast’s grand diversity of fish, wildlife and plants. Our goal is to work with them – and our public partners – to proactively conserve as many at-risk species as possible through voluntary and innovative measures. Together we can pass down our outdoor traditions to future generations, and help keep farms, forests and other lands working for both people and wildlife.”

*Cindy Dohner
Southeast Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

In 2011, the Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) began working with states, federal agencies and other partners to evaluate more than 400 fish, wildlife and plant species for potential listing under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). These evaluations are required due to litigation and petitions.

Goal

The Service is working with public and private partners to preclude the need to federally list as many at-risk species as possible through proactive conservation and the best available science.

Definition of At-Risk Species

Biologists commonly refer to species as “at-risk” if they face grave threats to their survival. For the purposes of this conservation strategy, the Service’s Southeast Region has defined “at-risk species” as those that are:

- Proposed for listing under the ESA by the Service;
- Candidates for listing under the ESA, which means they are in the queue to be listed; or



The gopher tortoise is a federally threatened species in its western range and a candidate for listing in its eastern range. Its burrow holes provide shelter for scores of other species, credit Chris Potin/Mississippi Army National Guard.



The Florida sandhill crane was petitioned for listing under the ESA in 2010, credit Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.



Some at-risk species live in the longleaf pine ecosystem, including the gopher tortoise, credit Randy Browning/USFWS.



The Bartram's hairstreak butterfly is a candidate species found in pine rocklands, a rare habitat in south Florida, credit Holly Salvato.

- Petitioned for listing under the ESA, which means a citizen or citizen group has requested that the Service list them.

As the Service develops proactive conservation strategies with partners for at-risk species, the states' Species of Greatest Conservation Need (defined as species with low or declining populations in need of conservation), will also be considered.

Our Partners

Anyone can help the Service conserve at-risk species, including a farmer, rancher, corporation, state, federal agency or local government. Some of our partners include the states, working through the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA); the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service and other federal agencies; private landowner groups; Georgia Power and other energy utilities; and other corporations.

Southeast Regional Strategy for Conserving At-Risk Species

The Service's Southeast Region is working in five action areas to accomplish the goal of conserving at-risk species:

- 1) Prioritize Species in Need of Conservation.** We are working closely with the states to evaluate species based on what we know about them and what conservation actions they may require to hopefully avoid the need to list them under the ESA.
- 2) Promote Voluntary Conservation Actions.** To make it easier and beneficial for partners to safeguard at-risk species, we are working to improve conservation tools for landowners that may reduce their regulatory burden.



The red knot is a candidate for federal listing. About the size of a coffee cup, it makes one of the longest annual migrations of any bird, traveling from its Arctic breeding grounds to southern South America, credit USFWS.

3) Work with Partnerships. We are working with a variety of partnerships to support their efforts to conserve at-risk species, including the SEAFWA, Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS), and Southeast Natural Resource Leaders Group (SENRLG).

4) Improve Data Collection and Sharing. We are evaluating the Service's data systems to better integrate them with the states' and other partners' databases. Having the best information available will help us make better conservation decisions.

5) Outreach. We are engaging interested partners to join the effort to conserve at-risk species.

Endangered Species Act Basics

To better understand how the Service can work with public and private partners to conserve at-risk species and preclude the need to list them, it's important to understand the ESA.



The Eastern hellbender, which ranges across 14 states including Alabama, Georgia, and North and South Carolina, has been petitioned for listing under the ESA, credit USFWS/Troy Wilson.



The Georgia aster is a candidate species believed to occur in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. Eleanor, Flickr.

Background

Passed by Congress in 1973, the ESA is the last-line defense for fish, wildlife and plant species edging toward extinction. It is intended to protect and recover imperiled species and the habitats where they live. The Service has primary responsibility for terrestrial and freshwater species, while the National Marine Fisheries Service is largely responsible for marine wildlife.

Plants and animals may be listed as either endangered or threatened. "Endangered" means a species is in danger of extinction. "Threatened" means a species is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. Species are listed based on their biological status (i.e., population size and trends) and threats to their existence.

Regulations

The ESA protects listed species and their habitats from being harassed, harmed, pursued, hunted, shot, wounded, killed, trapped, captured, and collected. Listed plants are not similarly protected, but it is illegal to collect or maliciously harm them on federal land, and they cannot be commercially traded.

In addition to the ESA, states may have their own laws restricting certain activities involving listed species.

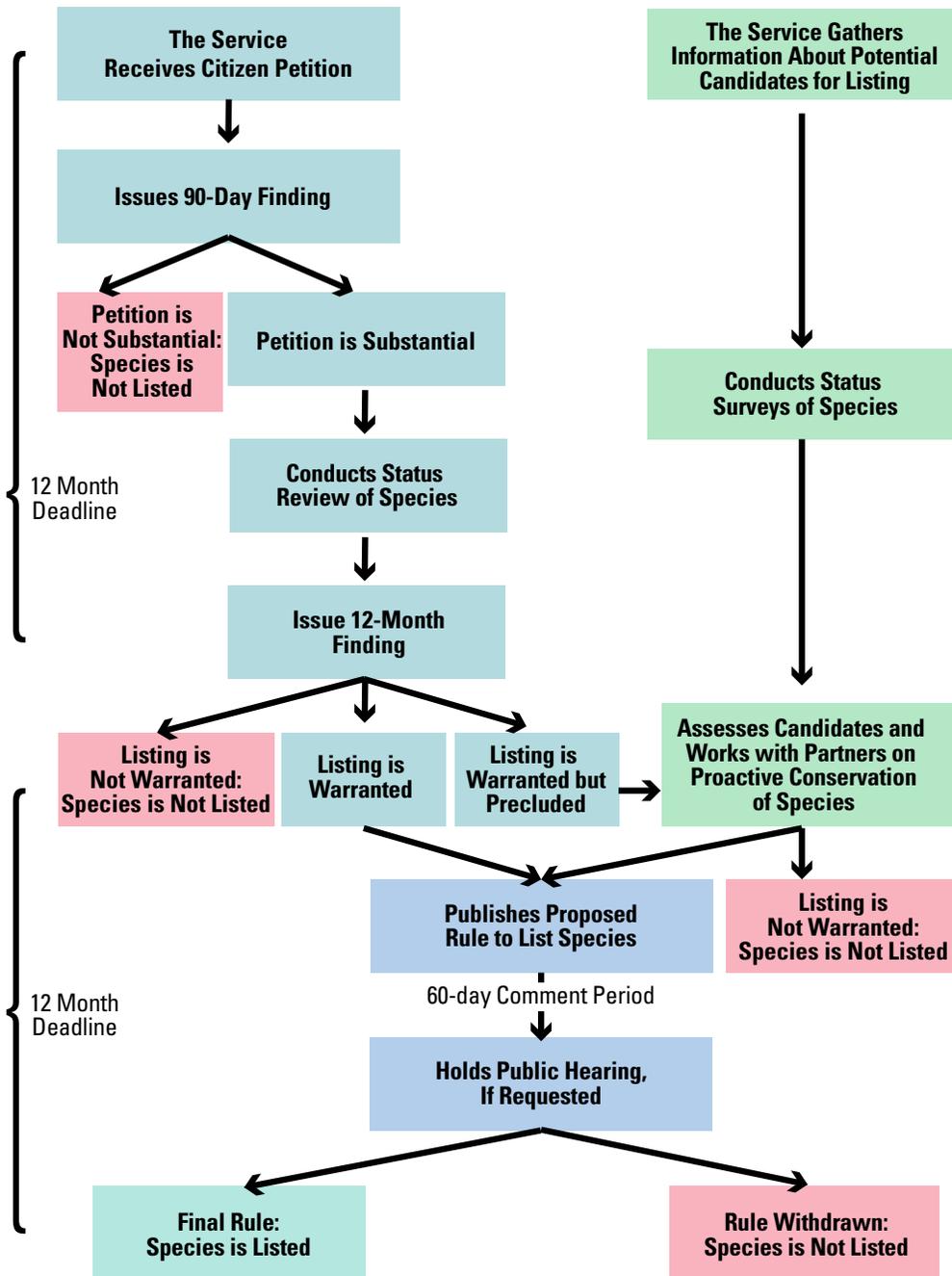
Recovery

The ultimate goal of the ESA is to help species rebound or recover so they no longer require federal protection. Service biologists, along with species experts, states, and others, write and implement recovery plans for the listed species.

Federal Agency Cooperation

The ESA requires federal agencies to promote conservation and consult with the Service to ensure their actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of listed species.

How U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Assesses Species Under the Endangered Species Act



Note: As part of a court-approved settlement to complete a backlog of listing decisions, the Service has committed to publish certain ESA listing actions – petition findings, listing determinations, critical habitat designations – in Fiscal Years 2013-2018.

Candidate Species

“Candidates” are species that warrant listing but have not been, due to higher listing priorities and limited resources. While they are in the queue for listing, the Service works with partners to conserve these species to prevent further decline and possibly eliminate the need to list them.

Critical Habitat

The ESA requires the designation of “critical habitat” for listed species, when “prudent and determinable.” These are areas that are essential to the conservation

of the species and may require special management considerations or protection.

The designation is made only after impacts to the economy, national security and other factors are weighed. Federal agencies are required to avoid destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat.

Critical habitat designation generally has no effect on non-federal landowners, unless the landowner receives a federal grant or needs a permit from a federal agency.



The aboriginal prickly-apple cactus is a candidate species found on Florida’s Gulf Coast. Only ten populations are left, most of which have fewer than ten plants, credit USFWS/Dave Bender.

Working with States

The Service provides funding to states to develop and maintain conservation programs for threatened and endangered species.

Working with Private Landowners

The Service’s Southeast Region recognizes the enormous contribution private landowners make to wildlife conservation. From the gopher tortoise in open pine forests, to the darter fish found in the riffles of mountain streams, the abundance and diversity of species found only in the Southeast are largely due to the conservation ethic of private landowners and the efforts of the states’ fish and wildlife agencies.

The Service also recognizes that most federally listed and at-risk species have some habitat on private land in the Southeast. To more fully engage private landowners in managing their lands and waters to benefit these species, the Service has developed several voluntary tools that both protect private land interests and provide incentives. These tools can be used in combinations to cover both listed and at-risk species.

Early conservation — before a species requires listing under the ESA — maximizes management options for landowners, minimizes the costs, and reduces the potential for restrictive land-use policies by addressing the needs of the species before regulatory requirements for listed species come into play. Voluntary conservation agreement tools available include:

■ Habitat Conservation Plans

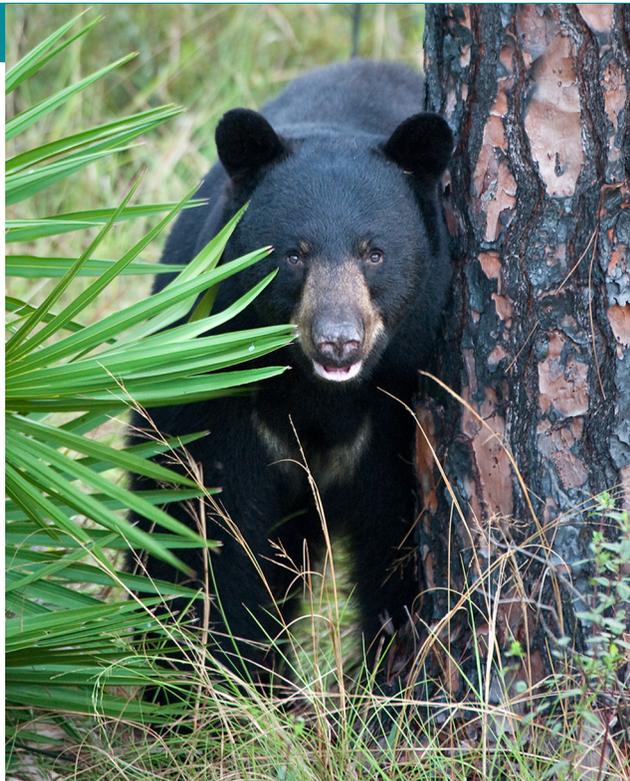
Habitat Conservation Plans can cover both listed and non-listed species and spell out steps landowners need to take to avoid, minimize and mitigate adverse impacts to listed species while developing their property. By following one of these plans, the landowner receives a federal permit to “take” listed species that is incidental to otherwise legal activities. Under the ESA, “take” means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect a federally protected species.

■ Safe Harbor Agreements

Under Safe Harbor Agreements, landowners voluntarily aid in the recovery of listed species by improving or maintaining wildlife habitat. In return they receive regulatory certainty, meaning that the agreement spells out any legal requirements. At the end of the agreement, the landowner may return the property to the “baseline” condition for the species and its habitat, even if it means an incidental “take” of the species. These are currently the most popular conservation tool among private landowners.

■ Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances

Non-federal landowners can voluntarily agree to protect unlisted or at-risk species on their properties in return for regulatory assurance. That means as long as they manage their land in accordance with the agreement, they will never be required to do more, even if the species covered in the agreement is later listed under the ESA. Agreed-upon land management practices may include leaving a vegetative buffer for a stream, prescribed burns, replanting forests and creating wildlife corridors. These agreements provide private landowners and state and local governments with flexibility to manage their land, while reducing their long-term costs in the event the species becomes listed.



The Florida black bear was removed from the list of candidate species in 1998 following successful conservation measures by multiple partners, credit © Carlton Ward, Jr.

Federal landowners can also sign on to Candidate Conservation Agreements, along with private and state partners, to help conserve a species. While these agreements also provide federal landowners some flexibility and cost-savings, federal agencies cannot receive regulatory assurances if the covered species becomes listed. Under the ESA, federal agencies have a special obligation to protect listed species.

■ Conservation Banks

Conservation banking is a free-market enterprise in which land is placed under permanent protection to mitigate habitat loss by conserving similar habitat elsewhere for listed or other at-risk species. Mitigation credits are supplied by landowners who enter into a Conservation Bank Agreement with the Service to manage their lands for listed and at-risk species. The landowners can then sell those credits



The robust redhorse is a large sucker fish once thought extinct. Now found in Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina, the fish was petitioned for listing under the ESA in 2010, credit Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources.

to other landowners or developers who need to meet mitigation requirements.

Successes

By working with private landowners, states, tribes, other federal agencies and non-governmental organizations, the Service has been able to conserve dozens of at-risk species and preclude the need to list them under the ESA. Some examples in the Southeast are:

■ Florida Black Bear

Conservation measures by multiple partners in Alabama, Georgia and Florida contributed to removal of the Florida black bear from candidate status in 1998.

■ Adams Cave Beetles

The greater and lesser Adams Cave beetles are small, predatory beetles discovered in 1964 in one cave in central Kentucky. Trespassers camping in the cave had degraded the habitat, threatening the beetles' survival. The beetles were listed as candidates under the ESA in 2001. In February 2005, the Service signed a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances with a land trust, which had received a one-acre donation of the land that included the cave entrance. The Service contributed \$78,000 to gate the cave, removing the threats, and the beetles were removed from the candidate list in December 2005.

■ Camp Shelby Burrowing Crayfish

Threats to the crayfish were reduced as a result of conservation efforts, including those outlined in a Candidate Conservation Agreement signed by the Service, the Mississippi National Guard at Camp Shelby, the U.S. Forest Service and the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks. The crayfish was removed from the list of candidate species in 2005.

Contact

For more information about how you can participate in the Southeast Region's efforts to conserve at-risk species, please contact Regional Coordinator Gabrielle “Gabe” Horner at 404/679 7066 or gabrielle_horner@fws.gov.