

Questions and Answers for the Proposed Listing and Critical Habitat Designation and Draft Economic Analysis for the Georgia Rockcress

1. What is the current status of the Georgia rockcress?

Only about 5,000 individual rockcress plants still exist in Georgia and Alabama. The Georgia rockcress has been a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 1999. On September 12, 2013, the Service proposed listing the rockcress as threatened with critical habitat.

2. What areas are proposed as critical habitat for the rockcress?

The Service is proposing to designate about 793 acres along river bluffs as critical habitat. The proposed critical habitat designations are located in Gordon, Floyd, Harris, Muscogee, Chattahoochee, and Clay Counties, Georgia, and; in Bibb, Dallas, Elmore, Monroe, Russell, Sumter and Wilcox Counties in Alabama. The rockcress occurs in each of the areas proposed for designation as critical habitat

3. What is critical habitat?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identifies critical habitat when it proposes to list an animal or plant for listing as endangered or threatened. Critical habitat, a term defined in the Endangered Species Act, is identified based on what an animal or plant needs to survive and reproduce by reviewing the best scientific information concerning a species' present and historical ranges, habitat and biology.

The designation of critical habitat helps ensure that federal agencies and the public are aware of the habitat needs of the Georgia rockcress, and proper consultation is conducted by federal agencies when required by law.

4. What does a critical habitat designation do?

When an area is designated as critical habitat for a listed species, federal agencies are required by law to ensure that any action they fund, authorize or carry out is not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of the habitat. This is carried out through consultation with the Service.

The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation area. A critical habitat designation also does not allow the government or public to access private lands, nor does it require implementation of restoration, recovery or enhancement measures by non-federal landowners.

Although most of the areas within the proposed rockcress critical habitat designation are located on private land, activities on those lands would only be impacted if they are authorized, funded or carried out by a federal agency. Activities in designated critical habitat that require federal involvement (for example, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit to build a dam) would need

to be reviewed by the Service. The federal agency would work with the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce or offset potential negative impacts to the critical habitat and the listed species.

There should be no or minimal impact on agricultural or timber companies, private landowners, or residential development. The Service relies on a number of voluntary, non-regulatory conservation programs to provide willing landowners with assurances to protect them for the work they do on their lands.

5. What is the economic analysis based on?

The economic analysis, which is required under the ESA, estimates the cost of conserving critical habitat for a listed plant or animal. Most of the estimated costs are administrative in nature and are only applicable when projects may diminish the conservation value of the habitat. The costs are borne largely by federal agencies, which are required to consult with the Service when a project they are funding, permitting or working on is likely to negatively affect the critical habitat.

According to the draft economic analysis for the Georgia rockcress, the estimated costs of the designation are not likely to exceed \$45,000 in 2014 dollars in any given year. The estimated, maximum cost per consultation is \$9,000, and the estimated number of consultations is five a year. Critical habitat is not likely to generate additional consultations and in circumstances where consultation does occur, additional project modifications beyond what is required to avoid jeopardizing the rockcress are unlikely.

The economic analysis does not consider the cost of the listing itself.

6. What happens with the information the Service receives during the public comment period?

The Service must base its reasoning and conclusions on the rulemaking record, consisting of the comments, scientific data, expert opinions, and facts accumulated during the pre-rule and proposed rule stages. To move forward with a final rule, the agency must conclude that its proposed solution will help accomplish the goals or solve the problems identified. It must also consider whether alternate solutions would be more effective or cost less.

If the rulemaking record contains persuasive new data or policy arguments, or poses difficult questions or criticisms, the Service may decide to terminate the rulemaking, or the Service may decide to continue the rulemaking but change aspects of the rule to reflect these new issues. If the changes are major, the Service could publish a supplemental proposed rule. If the changes are minor, or a logical outgrowth of the issues and solutions discussed in the proposed rules, the Service may proceed with a final rule.

7. How long does it take for the Service to reach a decision after the public comment period is closed?

There is generally no time limit for agencies to analyze the comments they receive. It is more or less dependent upon the number of comments received. However, when an agency publishes a final rule, generally the rule is effective no less than 30 days after the date of publication in the *Federal Register*.