

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1. What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking?

The Service is proposing to list the Suwannee moccasinshell as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Q2. What does it mean when a species is “threatened”?

If a species is threatened, that means it’s likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. In simple terms, endangered species are at the brink of extinction now. Threatened species are likely to be at the brink in the near future.

Q3. What does a listing mean to a private landowner?

The basic responsibility of private landowners having the Suwannee moccasinshell on their lands is to avoid “take” of the species. Take means to harass, harm, kill, trap, capture, or collect a species under the ESA. This definition includes land use activities that result in death or harm to the species.

Q4. What does a listing mean for federal agencies?

The ESA requires federal agencies to consult with the Service to ensure that any activity they fund, authorize, or carry out will not jeopardize the survival of the species. Therefore, federal agencies must consult with the Service for an activity involving federal funding, jurisdiction, or authorization that occurs on federal, public, or private land.

Q5. What is the range of the Suwannee Moccasinshell?

The Suwannee moccasinshell is a freshwater mussel endemic to the Suwannee River Basin in Florida and Georgia. Recent surveys targeting the species indicate it may be extirpated from the Withlacoochee River in Georgia, and has declined dramatically (both in range and abundance) in the Santa Fe River sub-basin in Florida. Its range presently includes the Suwannee River main channel and the lower Santa Fe River in Florida. Historical data are limited, however, its numbers rangewide appear to be considerably lower now than a few decades ago.

Q6. Why is the Suwannee Moccasinshell in trouble?

The primary reason for the Suwannee moccasinshell’s decline is the degradation of its habitat because of polluted runoff from agricultural lands, discharges from industrial and municipal wastewater sources and from mining operations, and decreased flows as a result of groundwater extraction and drought. These threats occur throughout its range,

but are more intense in two tributaries, the Withlacoochee and Santa Fe River systems. In portions its range, sedimentation has impacted its habitat. Other threats to the species include contaminant spills as a result of transportation accidents as well as industrial, agricultural, and municipal facilities; increased drought frequency and temperatures in the future as a result of climate change; greater vulnerability to certain threats because of its small population size and range; and competition and disturbance from the introduced Asian clam.

Q7. How do you know for sure that the species is disappearing from its range?

The Service's Panama City Field Office has coordinated with its partners including the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GDNR), and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to get the best scientific information available on the species. The FWC has conducted recent surveys within the Florida portions of the Suwannee River basin, and its assistance has provided critical information on the current status and distribution of the mussel. The Suwannee moccasinshell may be extirpated from the Withlacoochee River in Georgia and Florida. It hasn't been seen in Georgia in the last 50 years. The GDNR supports this listing action and plans to conduct surveys in the Georgia portions of the drainage during the 2016 field season. The Service has collaborated with the USGS to fund life history research on the species, and preliminary information from that research is presented in the proposed rule.

Q8. Will the Service designate critical habitat for the Suwannee moccasinshell?

If a species is listed as threatened or endangered, the Service must consider whether designating critical habitat is appropriate. The Service expects to issue a proposal to designate critical habitat for the Suwannee moccasinshell in the future.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA that refers to specific geographic areas that contain elements that are essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species. The Service designates critical habitat under the ESA for the purpose of consulting with federal agencies, which have to make special efforts to protect elements of these areas. It applies only to federal actions—activities carried out, funded or authorized by a federal agency. Critical habitat designation under the ESA does not set up a preserve, and it does not allow government or public access to private land.

A critical habitat proposal would only impact private landowners if work they were doing on their land required a federal permit or federal funds would be used to pay for it.

Q9. How do I submit a comment?

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 Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA, 22041-3803.

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, ext. 242.

Q10. Who do I contact for questions?

You can contact Sandra Pursifull (sandra_pursifull@fws.gov) at 850-769-0552, ext.240, or Denise Rowell (denise_rowell@fws.gov) at 251-441-6630. Both are with the Panama City Field Office located at 1601 Balboa Avenue, Panama City, FL, 32405.