

Final Listing – Threatened Species Status for the Suwannee Moccasinshell Questions and Answers

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

The Service is listing the Suwannee moccasinshell as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), meaning the moccasinshell is considered likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

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.

What changes occurred between the proposed listing and your final decision?

After consideration of the comments from 11 individuals and organizations during the 60-day comment period, and new information published or obtained since the proposed rule was published, the Service made changes to the final listing rule. Many minor changes and corrections, not affecting the determination (e.g., updating the Background section in response to comments, minor clarifications) were made throughout the final decision document. Below is a summary list of more substantive changes.

- The Taxonomy, that is the species scientific classification, discussion was refined slightly.
- A table was added to provide a clear and updated summary of all recent survey information. (See Table 2 in the decision document.)

- The flathead catfish was removed as a threat following information provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission indicating that flathead catfish have not become established in the Suwannee River Basin.
- Stream Channel Instability was added as a new threat as it was identified by a peer reviewer, and the Service provides a complete discussion in the final decision.

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.

What does a listing mean for federal agencies?

The ESA already 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. Since federal agencies must already consult with the Service for an activity involving federal funding, jurisdiction, or authorization that occurs on federal, public, or private land, this listing will simply add the moccasinshell to their existing project review and ESA determination processes.

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.

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 mining operations, and decreased flows as a result of groundwater extraction and drought. In portions of its range, sedimentation has impacted its habitat. Other threats to the species include accidental contaminant releases from industrial, municipal, and mining sources, and as a result of transportation accidents; 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.

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

The Service's Panama City Field Office coordinated with its partners including the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and the U.S. Geological Survey to get the best scientific information available on the species. During 2013–2015, biologists with these agencies surveyed 144 sites covering nearly all of the Suwannee moccasinshell's historical range. The species was not detected in the Withlacoochee and upper Santa Fe subbasins and lower Suwannee River. In areas where the species was detected, its densities were found to be exceedingly low in comparison to other mussel species.

How will the Suwannee moccasinshell benefit from protection under the ESA?

Listing raises awareness about the need for multi-state and local jurisdiction cooperation and coordination of conservation efforts, enhances research programs, and encourages the development of conservation measures that could help slow habitat loss and population declines. A recovery plan, developed after a species is listed, identifies specific ways to recover the species and typically depends on the assistance of species experts; other federal, state and local agencies; industry; landowners; private conservation organizations; academia; and other stakeholders.

The ESA includes regulatory protections regarding import and export and the “take” (killing, harming, harassing, pursuing or removing the species from the wild) of listed species. The ESA also requires federal agencies to conduct their activities in such a way that conserves listed species.

Will the Service designate critical habitat for the Suwannee moccasinshell?

Yes. When a species is listed as threatened or endangered, the Service must consider whether designating critical habitat is appropriate. The Service is considering which specific areas are essential to the Suwannee moccasinshell’s conservation and expects to issue a proposal to designate critical habitat, as well as an associated draft economic analysis, for the moccasinshell at a later date because more information concerning appropriate areas for the designation is needed.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a listed species and which may require special management considerations or protection. Specifying the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species helps federal agencies identify where to utilize their authorities to benefit listed species. The designation also helps focus the conservation efforts of other conservation partners, such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations and individuals. See

<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/what-we-do/critical-habitats.html>

Where can I find more information on the Suwannee moccasinshell?

Additional information can be found online at

<https://www.fws.gov/southeast/wildlife/mussel/suwannee-moccasinshell>.