



News Release

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CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR CACTUS FERRUGINOUS PYGMY-OWL

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed designating 1.2 million acres of critical habitat for the endangered cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl in southern Arizona. A draft economic analysis of the proposed critical habitat designation has also been released today.

The draft economic analysis projects 10-year costs resulting from the pygmy-owl's listing and critical habitat designation in a range of between \$70 to \$108 million, with \$33 to \$52 million of those costs resulting from critical habitat designation alone. The bulk of projected costs would be borne by the housing development and mining industries when they seek Federal dollars or permits to modify washes and streams and/or discharge pollutants. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) activities, Bureau of Land Management grazing, Federal Highways projects, and park, monument and refuge management are projected to incur some costs protecting individual pygmy-owls, but of those entities, only INS is expected to have expenses associated with critical habitat.

The Service is required to consider economics when establishing critical habitat, but is not permitted to consider economic impacts when evaluating whether a species needs protection under the Endangered Species Act. "We have some leeway when weighing economic costs verses conservation benefits when designating critical habitat, as long as those considerations don't result in extinction of the population," said Dale Hall, the Service's Southwest Regional Director. "We are earnestly seeking public input in our decision making process."

A public hearing to receive information and suggestions will be held from 6:30 - 9 p.m. on January 23, 2003, at the Leo Rich Theater (Tucson Convention Center), 260 South Church in Tucson.

The proposal (published in today's *Federal Register*), the draft economic analysis, maps, and other pygmy-owl information are available on the Internet at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov> or by contacting the Field Office Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2321 W. Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona, 85021-4951 or by calling (602) 242-0210. Written comments may be sent by mail to

the Field Office Supervisor, by facsimile at (602) 242-2513 or by email to cfpo_habitat@fws.gov, but must be received by February 25, 2003, to be considered in the decision making process.

The designation would require Federal agencies to evaluate their projects and the permits they issue to ensure that they leave intact an interconnected system of verified nesting and suitable dispersal habitat extending north from the Mexican border to north of Ajo, Arizona and to southern Pinal County. The mix of dense Sonoran desertscrub and semidesert grasslands in the proposed area is essential to the endangered population's survival – serving as breeding and sheltering habitat and “stepping stones” for dispersal and required movement between groups.

“Today's proposal identifies areas where we should focus conservation activities to help conserve the pygmy-owl and assure that the Federal government does not contribute to habitat loss that would impede the owl's recovery,” said Hall. “Our proposal identifies those areas that are essential to the conservation of the pygmy-owl. It incorporates many of the recognized tenets of conservation biology that are also emphasized in the recommended recovery strategy for the pygmy-owl.”

If adopted as proposed, the designation would replace the 730,000-acre critical habitat established in 1999 which was vacated by the Arizona District Court in September 2001. Most of the acreage increase results from inclusion of federal land, including National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Refuge System, and Bureau of Land Management. Last year, a coalition of plaintiffs filed suit challenging the validity of the Service's listing the Arizona population of the pygmy-owl as endangered and the 1999 designation of critical habitat. The pygmy-owl's endangered status in Arizona was upheld in Federal Court but, the Service voluntarily remanded the critical habitat designation pending completion of a more rigorous economic analysis.

The presently proposed critical habitat is designed to link sites where owls are known to occur on Bureau of Land Management, State, and private lands, as well as newly added Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Refuge System lands to provide for genetic mixing and dispersal of owls. The proposed designation does not extend north to the Salt River as had the 1999 designation. It also omits the Tohono O'odham Nation – recognizing the tribe's process by which it and Federal agencies coordinate to evaluate and address potential impacts to pygmy-owls related to various activities on the Nation.

The six-inch owl was once common throughout much of south and central Arizona and in what is now the Phoenix urban area where it nested in tree and cactus cavities in riparian streamside thickets, woodlands, thornscrub and desert scrub habitat. Pygmy-owls are presently distributed in three general areas: Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, the Altar Valley, and northwest Tucson and south-central Pinal County. Arizona surveys documented 41 adult pygmy-owls in 1999, 34 in 2000, 36 in 2001 and 18 in 2002. The pygmy-owl is endangered principally by the loss and modification of habitat due to dams, water diversions and urban expansion.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores

wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: The Federal Register proposal, draft economic analysis, maps, photographs of the pygmy-owl and other pygmy-owl information, are available on the Internet at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov>.

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