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SERVICE ANNOUNCES AVAILABILITY OF DRAFT ECONOMIC ANALYSIS FOR FOUR CENTRAL TEXAS SALAMANDERS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today the Notice of Availability of the draft economic analysis (DEA) for the proposed critical habitat for the Austin blind salamander, Jollyville Plateau salamander, Georgetown salamander, and the Salado salamander. The DEA provides estimated costs of the foreseeable potential economic impacts of the proposed critical habitat designation for the four central Texas salamanders over the next 23 years. The Service is also announcing the reopening of the comment period on the proposed critical habitat for four central Texas salamanders for 45 days.

On August 22, 2012, the Service proposed to list the four central Texas salamanders as endangered and to designate 5,983 acres (2,440 hectares) of critical habitat in 52 units in Bell, Travis and Williamson counties. Based upon information received during the first 60-day comment period, the Service is proposing to revise the proposed critical habitat units and acreage. In addition, the revised proposal includes an amended required determinations section, an amended exclusions section and the availability of a refined impervious cover analysis.

The current proposal revises the proposed critical habitat for both the Georgetown salamander and the Jollyville salamander. The revised rule includes an additional 474 acres (192 hectares) of proposed critical habitat for the Jollyville salamander; however, the numbers of critical habitat units for the Jollyville salamander are reduced from 33 to 30. Critical habitat revisions for the Georgetown salamander include adjustments to the critical habitat boundaries which does not change the overall proposed acreage. In total, this rule proposes to designate 6,457 acres (2,613 hectares) of critical habitat in 49 units.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species, and which may require special management considerations or protection. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, establish a refuge or preserve and has no impact on private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits.

When specifying an area as critical habitat, the Endangered Species Act requires the Service to consider economic and other relevant impacts of the designation. If the benefits of excluding an

area outweigh the benefits of designating it, the Secretary may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless that would jeopardize the existence of a threatened or endangered species.

The draft economic analysis quantifies economic impacts of the four central Texas salamanders conservation efforts associated with the following categories of activity: development, water management activities, transportation projects, utility projects, mining and livestock grazing. The draft economic analysis estimated impacts for development, transportation, mining and species and habitat management activities. No impacts are forecasted for water management activities, utility projects and livestock grazing activities. Total present value impacts anticipated to result from the critical habitat designation of all units for the four central Texas salamanders are approximately \$29 million over 23 years. All incremental costs are administrative in nature and result from the consideration of adverse modification in section 7 consultations and re-initiation of consultations for existing management plans.

In releasing the draft economic analysis, the Service is also reopening the public comment period on the proposed listing of the four central Texas salamanders and the revised critical habitat proposal. The Service will accept public comments received or postmarked on or before March 11, 2013. For more information on this proposal, what to comment on, or how to submit comments, see the *Federal Register* notice on our web site at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest>.

For further information contact Adam Zerrenner, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Austin Ecological Services Field Office, 10711 Burnet Road, Suite 200, Austin, Texas 78758; by telephone at 512-490-0057 x248; or by facsimile at 512-490-0974. If you use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD), call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 800-877-8339.

America's fish, wildlife and plant resources belong to all of us, and ensuring the health of imperiled species is a shared responsibility. We're working to actively engage conservation partners and the public in the search for improved and innovative ways to conserve and recover imperiled species. To learn more about the Endangered Species program, go to <http://www.fws.gov/angered/>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfws, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfws>.

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