



News Release

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Service Announces Draft Environmental Assessment on an Application for an Enhancement of Survival Permit and Draft Safe Harbor Agreement for the Houston Toad

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announces the publication in the *Federal Register* of a Notice of Availability of the draft Environmental Assessment on an enhancement of survival permit and associated draft Safe Harbor Agreement (Agreement) for the Houston toad. The requested permit, submitted by the Environmental Defense Fund (Applicant), is for a period of 30 years and would authorize incidental take of the endangered Houston toad as a result of conservation actions, land management, and other land-use activities.

The conservation activities are expected to enhance Houston toad habitat, enhance breeding and toadlet emergence, create or enhance the linkage between toad habitat to facilitate dispersal, and increase toad population numbers among other benefits for the toad.

A 60-day comment period will begin with the publication of this announcement in the *Federal Register*. The public is invited to review and comment on the draft Environmental Assessment, enhancement of survival permit application, and the associated draft Safe Harbor Agreement. Written comments should be received on or before January 13, 2012. For further information on how and where to submit comments, and to review and/or download these documents visit the Service's Southwest Region's website, <http://southwest.fws.gov/>.

Safe Harbor Agreements (SHA) are voluntary agreements between the Service and non-Federal landowners to promote recovery of listed species. Through the agreement, landowners that agree to manage the land for the benefit of a listed species will not be subject to additional restrictions on their property as a result of their conservation actions.

Non-Federal landowners within Austin, Bastrop, Burlason, Colorado, Lavaca, Lee, Leon, Milam, and Robertson counties, Texas, may enroll under the proposed Agreement, if it is approved, by entering into a Cooperative Agreement with the Applicant. Under a SHA, participating property

owners voluntarily undertake management activities to enhance, restore, or maintain habitat benefiting species listed under the Endangered Species Act.

After enrolling and signing a Cooperative Agreement, landowners will receive a certificate of inclusion to document landowners' participation in the SHA and convey incidental take authorization from the Applicant to certificate recipients. In exchange for undertaking the specified actions, participating property owners receive formal assurances from the Service that if they fulfill the conditions of the SHA, the Service will not require any additional or different management activities by the participants without their consent, and they will receive incidental take coverage. In addition, at the end of the agreement period, participants may return the enrolled property to the baseline conditions that existed at the beginning of the SHA.

Section 9 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 prohibits "taking" of threatened or endangered species. However, the Service, under limited circumstances, may issue permits to take threatened and endangered wildlife species incidental to, and not the purpose of, otherwise lawful activities.

The incidental take of toads may occur from: (1) habitat management actions conducted in accordance with the conservation activities in the Agreement, (2) ongoing land use activities that may have an increased chance of taking a toad if toad numbers increase, as expected, and (3) cessation of the conservation activities if enrolled landowners exercise their authorization to do so under the permit.

Houston toads are generally brown and speckled, but individual coloration can vary considerably. Adult Houston toads are medium-sized (2 to 3.5 inches) with females larger and bulkier than males. The Houston toad is endemic to east central Texas. Houston toad habitat consists of rolling uplands characterized by pine and/or oak woodlands underlain by deep, sandy soils. Although the Houston toad does not appear to be tied to the presence of a particular tree species, pine is dominant in the Lost Pines Forest of Bastrop County, which is home to the largest known populations of Houston toads. The Houston toad was listed as an endangered species in October, 1970.

The health of threatened and endangered species is strongly linked to our own well-being. Millions of Americans depend on habitat that sustains these species – for clean air and water, recreational opportunities and for their livelihoods. By taking action to protect imperiled native fish, wildlife and plants, we can ensure a healthy future for our community.

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>.