



# News Release

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[www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/)

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## **Service Proposes to Protect Two Arizona Cacti Under the Endangered Species Act** *Agency Seeks Information from the Public, Scientific Community Before Making Final Decision*

Current evidence suggests that the acuña cactus and Fickeisen plains cactus are in danger of becoming extinct in the foreseeable future, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. As a result, the Service has proposed to protect the species under the Endangered Species Act, and is seeking new information from the public and the scientific community that will assist the agency in making a final determination. A third plant, the Lemmon fleabane, is being removed from the Act's list of candidate species.

The acuña cactus is a small spherical cactus that occurs in valleys and on small knolls and gravel ridges in the Sonoran Desert scrub of southern Arizona's Maricopa, Pima and Pinal counties and in Sonora, Mexico. The total rangewide population is estimated at 3,400 plants including about 650 in Mexico.

The Service first identified the acuña cactus as a candidate for ESA protection in 1993. Over the last three decades, increased insect attack in combination with water and heat stress have resulted in more than 80 percent mortality with little or no recruitment documented within monitored populations. As more than 78 percent of the known living acuña cactus individuals occur along the U.S. Mexico border, border activities are also considered a threat to this species.

The Fickeisen plains cactus is a rounded, quarter-sized cactus that retracts below ground during the winter and summer months. It is a rare and endemic cactus that is restricted to small, isolated populations in areas of Kaibab limestone soils on the Colorado Plateau in Coconino and Mohave counties, Arizona. About 1,150 Fickeisen plains cacti among 33 populations have been documented rangewide since the species' discovery in the late 1950s.

The Service first identified the Fickeisen plains cactus as a candidate for ESA protection in 1980. Long-term and short-term monitoring data from a limited number of sites indicate significant population declines due to poor reproduction and little recruitment. Identified threats include livestock grazing, nonnative invasive species, rodent and rabbit predation, extended drought and climate change.

The ESA requires the Service to identify the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species, which the Act terms "critical habitat." This identification helps Federal agencies identify actions that may affect listed species or their habitat, and to work with the Service to avoid or minimize those impacts. Identifying this habitat also helps raise awareness of the habitat needs of imperiled species and focuses the conservation efforts of other partners such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual landowners.

Service biologists have identified 53,720 acres in Maricopa, Pima and Pinal counties that may contain desert habitat essential to the conservation of the acuña cactus. Of the total acreage identified, 55 percent is on federal lands, 27 percent on state lands, 10 percent on tribal lands, and 8 percent on private lands. For the Fickeisen plains cactus, nine units totaling 49,186 acres were identified as essential in Mohave and Coconino counties; 34 percent is on federal lands, 28 percent on state lands, 19 percent on tribal lands, and 19 percent on private lands.

Although non-federal lands have initially been included in these areas, activities on these lands are not affected now, and will not necessarily be affected if the species is protected under the ESA in the future. Only if an activity is authorized, funded or carried out by a federal agency will the agency need to work with the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to listed species or their identified habitat.

Today's proposal is part of the Service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan that resolves a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA Listing Program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce litigation-driven workloads and allow the agency to focus its resources on the species most in need of the ESA's protections over the next five years.

The final decision to add the acuña cactus or the Fickeisen plains cactus to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, as well as the final identification of areas containing habitat essential to the species, will be based on the best scientific information available. In addition, the Service will utilize an economic analysis to inform and refine its identification of this habitat. Only areas that contain habitat essential to the conservation of the species, and where the benefits of this habitat outweigh potential economic impacts, will be included in the final identification.

The Service will open a 60-day public comment period October 3, 2012, to allow the public to review and comment on the proposal and provide additional information. All relevant information received from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties will be considered and addressed in the agency's final listing determination for the species and identification of habitat essential to its conservation.

The Service also announces that the Lemmon fleabane, a candidate for listing under the Act since 1996, is being removed from the list of candidate species because the main threat (wildfire) does not rise to a level of significance such that the species is in danger of extinction or likely to become so in the foreseeable future. The Lemmon fleabane is a small perennial plant that grows in crevices and ledges within a single canyon on Department of Defense lands on Fort Huachuca in southern Arizona.

The proposed rule, maps, and other information about these plants are available on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/> or <http://www.regulations.gov>, or by contacting the Service's Arizona Ecological Service Office at (602) 242-0210. Comments on the proposal can be submitted electronically via the Federal eRulemaking Portal at: <http://www.regulations.gov>; or can be mailed or hand delivered to Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R2-ES-2012-0061, Division of Policy and Directives Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203. Comments must be received on or before December 3, 2012.

More information is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/>. Photo support is at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/Plants.htm>.

*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*

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