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For Release: March 20, 2012

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Designation of Critical Habitat and Listing for the Chiricahua Leopard Frog

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), is designating approximately 10,346 acres of critical habitat for the Chiricahua leopard frog (*Lithobates chiricahuensis*) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The critical habitat is found in Apache, Cochise, Gila, Graham, Greenlee, Pima, Santa Cruz, and Yavapai Counties, Arizona; and Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, Sierra, and Socorro Counties, New Mexico.

In addition, because of a taxonomic revision of the Chiricahua leopard frog, the Service reassessed the status of and threats to the currently described species *Lithobates chiricahuensis* and is listing the currently described species as threatened. This rule is effective on April 19, 2012.

This final rule and the associated final economic analysis and final environmental assessment are available on the Internet at <http://www.regulations.gov>, and the Southwest Region web site at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/>. The Service first listed the Chiricahua leopard frog under the ESA as a threatened species on June 13, 2002. The listing included a special rule to encourage owners of occupied ponds to routinely maintain their ponds.

When the Service listed the Chiricahua leopard frog in 2002, the Ramsey Canyon leopard frog, found on the eastern slopes of the Huachuca Mountains in Cochise County, was thought to be a unique species. Scientists have since determined that the Ramsey Canyon leopard frog is taxonomically the Chiricahua leopard frog. As a result, the Service reassessed the status of and threats to the then described Chiricahua leopard frog, including the population previously described as Ramsey Canyon leopard frog. Today's action retains the special rule for livestock pond maintenance.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA 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. Critical habitat designation provides for the conservation of threatened and endangered species in several ways. Specifying the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species helps federal agencies identify where to utilize their authorities to benefit the species as required by the ESA. Designating critical habitat also helps focus the conservation efforts of other conservation partners, such as State and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individuals. An extensive group of conservation partners completed and began implementing a recovery plan for the Chiricahua leopard frog in 2007.

In addition to serving as a notification tool, the designation of critical habitat also provides significant regulatory protection for threatened and endangered species – the requirement that federal agencies consult with the Service to ensure actions they fund, authorize or carry out are not likely to destroy or adversely modify critical habitat. Protection afforded to listed species by the ESA also conveys significant protection to the habitat they occupy, regardless of whether that habitat has been formally designated as critical habitat. However, a critical habitat designation prohibits destruction and adverse modification of habitat that is currently unoccupied by listed species but is needed for their recovery, as well as to occupied habitat.

Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge or preserve. In general, a critical habitat designation has no impact on private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits.

The health of threatened and endangered species, especially amphibians, is strongly linked to our own well-being. Millions of Americans depend on habitat that sustains these species – for clean air and water, hunting, fishing, and other 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 and our economy.

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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