



News Release

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ENDANGERED SPECIES PROTECTION PROPOSED FOR SOUTHWEST FISH

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed adding the Gila chub (*Gila intermedia*), a minnow native to southwestern streams, to the list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act. The chub is proposed as endangered with critical habitat along 208 miles of spring-fed and perennial streams and headwaters in New Mexico and Arizona.

Historically the chub was found throughout the Gila River basin in southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, and northeastern Sonora Mexico. Today only 31 isolated and vulnerable populations remain.

Humans have affected southwestern riparian systems over several thousand years. By the late 1800s, watersheds were in poor condition from uncontrolled livestock grazing, mining, expanded irrigation agriculture, hay and timber harvesting, and fire suppression. These activities led to such long-term habitat degradation that the impacts are still felt today.

“Although these changes took place nearly a century ago, the aquatic ecosystem hasn’t bounced back and may never fully recover,” said H. Dale Hall, Director of the Service’s Southwest Region. “Today, people do a much better job of managing their livestock, but the habitat is so degraded that this once widespread southwest native fish is confined to deep pools in the headwaters.”

The Gila chub today is found in less than 15 percent of its historic range. The fish faces additional threats from increased groundwater pumping, growing development pressures and competition from non-native fish. These factors, as well as the introduction of diseases to chubs, have contributed to the species’ decline and necessitated today’s proposal.

The Gila chub is a small-finned, deep-bodied, chunky, darkly-colored minnow adapted to low-flowing streams subject to seasonal droughts. Males reach 6 inches and females can exceed 8 inches in length. Gila chub are highly secretive, preferring quiet, deeper waters, especially pools, or remaining near cover including terrestrial vegetation, boulders, and fallen logs in smaller streams, springs, and cienegas (desert wetlands), and can survive in small artificial impoundments.

The Service has also proposed designating critical habitat for 26 of the 31 populations along headwater streams of seven rivers. The proposed critical habitat designation includes 208 miles of these streams and includes a 300-foot riparian zone adjacent to each side of the river. The majority of proposed

critical habitat is found on Federal lands. Of the total, 122 miles are lands managed by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Fifty of the miles are on tribal lands. A small portion is private land, 17.8 miles. About 11 miles is on county land and seven on state lands. The five populations not covered in the proposal have other protections in place that safeguard the species, or are found only in Mexico. Areas crucial to a species survival can be left out of a critical habitat designation if sufficient management protections are in place.

The Gila chub evolved in an environment of periodic drought and is adapted to streams that may experience periods of low flow or drying (i.e., intermittent streams). The stream reaches proposed as critical habitat all currently maintain, at a minimum, perennial pools considered to be preferred habitat of the Gila chub.

By definition, critical habitat does not include developed areas that do not provide elements necessary for the survival of the species, even though they may lie within designated critical habitat boundaries. For example, paved roads, dikes, levees, diversion structures, railroad tracks, railroad trestles, water diversion canals outside of natural stream channels, cultivated agricultural land, and residential, commercial, and industrial developments would be excluded.

Designation of critical habitat may have an impact on private landowners taking actions on their land only if federal funding or permits are involved. In similar situations, the Service has found that well-managed livestock grazing does not jeopardize an endangered species. Management actions such as habitat monitoring, limiting cattle from entering riparian areas, and range improvements have negated adverse effects.

“We’re looking for additional scientific and commercial information that is relevant to our proposal to grant endangered species protection to the Gila chub, as well as economic information regarding the critical habitat proposal,” said Hall. “Public participation in this information gathering is essential to our developing proper protection for the fish.”

Today’s action satisfies the terms of a court-approved settlement agreement reached in response to litigation by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project, and the California Native Plant Society. The agreement is part of a comprehensive settlement agreement announced by Interior Secretary Gale Norton and these conservation groups in 2001. The agreement freed up funds that had been set aside for litigation and allowed the Service to complete work on several species in need of federal protection, including the Gila chub.

The proposal was published in today’s Federal Register and is 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, AZ 85021-4951 (602-242-0210, FAX 242-2513). Requests for a public hearing must be received by the Field Office Supervisor in writing by September 23, 2002. Written comments on the proposed rule must be received by October 8, 2002.

The Service is presently preparing a draft economic analysis and a draft environmental assessment of the proposed critical habitat designation. The Service will announce an extension or reopening of the public comment period when the drafts are available. A final decision on this listing and critical habitat proposal will be made in July 2003.

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 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 520 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 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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A photo of the Gila chub and other supporting information are available on the Service's web site <http://arizonaes.fws.gov>.