



News Release

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SERVICE SEEKS ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON SOUTHWEST FISH

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has re-opened the comment period on its 2002 proposal to add the Gila chub (*Gila intermedia*), a minnow native to southwestern streams, to the list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act. The chub was proposed to be added to the list in September 2002. The proposal also included designating 212 miles of spring-fed and perennial streams and headwaters in New Mexico and Arizona as critical habitat.

A draft economic analysis and draft environmental assessment are now available for review and comment. The draft economic analysis estimates the impacts of Gila chub conservation efforts in the proposed designated areas, not just those exclusively associated with this proposed critical habitat designation, to be between \$800,000 to \$1.9 million annually.

“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 Larry Bell, acting Deputy Director for the Southwest Region. “Public participation in this information gathering is essential to our developing proper protection for the fish.”

Three public hearings on the proposal, draft economic analysis, and draft environmental assessment will be preceded by an informational session. The informational sessions will be held from 3 to 4:30 p.m. followed by a public hearing from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at:

-- September 13, 2005 in Silver City, New Mexico at the Flame Convention Center, 2800 Pinos Altos Road.

-- September 14, 2005 in Thatcher, Arizona at the Eastern Arizona College Activity Center, Lee Little Theater (Information Session - Activity Center Quiet Lounge), 1014 North College Avenue.

-- September 15, 2005 in Camp Verde, Arizona, at the Camp Verde Unified School District Multi-Use Complex Theater, 280 Camp Lincoln Road.

Historically the chub occurred throughout the Gila River basin in southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, and northeastern Sonora Mexico. The Gila chub today is found in less than 15 percent of its historical range; only 34 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. The fish faces additional threats from increased groundwater pumping, growing development pressures, and competition from non-native fish.

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.

The Service proposed designating critical habitat for 27 of the 34 populations along headwater streams of seven rivers – mostly on Federal lands. The proposed designation includes a 300-foot riparian zone adjacent to each side of the river.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations or protections. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service.

By definition, critical habitat also does not include developed areas that do not provide elements essential to the conservation of the survival of the species, even though these areas 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 not be considered critical habitat.

The Endangered Species Act requires the Service to designate critical habitat on the basis of the best scientific data available, after taking into consideration the economic impact, and any other relevant impact, of specifying any particular area as critical habitat. The Service may exclude areas from critical habitat designation when the benefits of exclusion outweigh the benefits of including the areas within critical habitat, provided the exclusion will not result in extinction of the species.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the Service and state wildlife management areas.

The proposal, draft economic analysis, and draft environmental assessment are 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) or e-mailed to gilachubcomments@fws.gov. Written comments on the proposed rule must be received by Sept. 30, 2005. The Service is under a court settlement to complete its determination by Oct. 21, 2005.

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 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 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 Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: A photo of the Gila chub and other supporting information are available on the Service's web site <http://www.fws.gov/arizonaes/Fish.htm> and <http://www.fws.gov/arizonaes> .