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Louisiana Pinesnake Proposed to be Added as Threatened Under the Endangered Species Act

The Louisiana pinesnake, a large, non-venomous snake now found only in isolated areas of Louisiana and Texas, is being proposed for listing as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

At the same time, the Service is seeking ideas and comments on activities that should be considered for inclusion in an upcoming list of activities that would be exempted from any impacts of this proposed action under the ESA's Section 4d. It's an opportunity for the Service to hear from private landowners, timber companies, conservation groups and anyone interested in our work to protect the Louisiana pinesnake and to keep working lands working.

The decision to propose the listing is based on an analysis of the best available scientific and commercial data regarding the status of the snake and threats to its existence. A threatened designation means a species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a big part of its range in the two states.

"This unique snake needs protection," said Cindy Dohner, the Service's Southeast Regional Director. "Like other rare fish and wildlife in these natural areas such as the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, conserving and restoring the Louisiana pinesnake's habitat is crucial to its survival."

The Louisiana pinesnake's proposed listing is part of the Service's effort to implement a court-approved settlement under a Multi-District Listing agreement aimed at significantly reducing a litigation-driven workload. For more information, click here:

<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/>.

The Louisiana pinesnake is an egg-laying constrictor that ranges from four to six feet in length. It has a buff to yellowish background color with dark brown to russet dorsal blotches covering its total length, and its belly is unmarked or boldly patterned with black markings. One characteristic is that its body markings are always conspicuously different at opposite ends of its body. It has a small head with a pointed snout, and is a good burrower.

The Louisiana pinesnake is currently found in open-canopied southern pine forests of north and central Louisiana and east Texas. It primarily eats rodents called Baird's pocket gophers, which contributes to a balanced and functioning ecosystem. The snake is secretive in nature and spends much of its time underground in burrows of its pocket gopher prey. Like its prey, the Louisiana pinesnake's habitat primarily consists of sandy, well-drained soils in an open-canopied pine forest, with a reduced shrub layer, and dense, ground cover dominated by grasses and forbs.

This snake's decline is primarily attributed to the widespread loss and degradation of the longleaf pine ecosystem because of habitat fragmentation, fire suppression, conversion of suitable pine

forests to pine plantations lacking adequate herbaceous vegetation, and agricultural and urban development. These factors have restricted the remaining snakes to several small, isolated populations. Other threats to the snake's survival include the effects of road mortality and predation acting on genetically compromised populations with naturally low reproduction rates. Disease, entanglement and death from plastic mesh erosion control blankets, and killing by humans also could potentially affect the species' survival.

The Louisiana pinesnake is closely aligned with a small part of the historic longleaf range that existed in west-central Louisiana and east Texas. By the 1930's, much of the sandy, longleaf pine savannahs historically occupied by the Louisiana pinesnake had been lost. And by the late 1980's, longleaf pine habitat acreage in Louisiana and Texas was only about 15 percent and eight percent, respectively, of what had existed in 1935. However, an extensive partnership of federal and state agencies, zoos, and conservation organizations, has been taking steps to reverse the decline of the longleaf pine ecosystem and the Louisiana pinesnake. Individual landowners and businesses have also engaged in habitat conservation beneficial to the Louisiana pinesnake.

“One of the primary purposes of the ESA is to work with others to make sure the natural areas fish and wildlife need to survive and thrive are in good shape,” Dohner added. “Conservation actions taken to restore longleaf pine habitat will provide benefits to the Louisiana pinesnake and other fish and wildlife that need these healthy places to live – listed and non-listed alike.”

The Service has determined that the designation of critical habitat for the Louisiana pinesnake is prudent, but not determinable at this time. The Service is continuing to consider what areas may be essential to the snake's conservation and expects to propose a designation of critical habitat in 2017.

The Service is publishing a rule proposing to list the Louisiana pinesnake as threatened in the *Federal Register* on October 6, 2016. The Louisiana pinesnake was added to the Service's list of candidates for federal protection in 1999.

The complete proposed rule can be obtained by visiting the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> at Docket Number FWS-R4-ES-2016-0121. A copy also can be obtained by contacting U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 646 Cajundome Boulevard, Suite 400, Lafayette, Louisiana, 70506; phone: 337-291-3100.

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