



Questions and Answers

Proposed Rule to List San Fernando Valley Spineflower as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act

Q. What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposing?

A. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to list the San Fernando Valley spineflower, (*Chorizanthe parryi* var. *fernandina*) a plant species in southern California, as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The best available scientific and commercial data available indicate that the San Fernando Valley spineflower is likely to become endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range within the foreseeable future based on existing and potential threats to the species and its habitat.

Q. What is a San Fernando Valley spineflower?

A. The San Fernando Valley spineflower is a low-growing herbaceous annual plant in the buckwheat family and is typical of many winter-spring native annuals that occur in the Mediterranean climate of California. Historical records show that the San Fernando Valley spineflower was found in the hills, mesas, and sandy areas of the San Gabriel Mountain foothills and near Santa Ana in Orange County. Presumed to be extinct by the botanical community for more than 70 years, the San Fernando Valley spineflower was rediscovered at two locations in Ventura and Los Angeles counties in 1999 and 2000, respectively.

Q. Where does San Fernando Valley spineflower exist today?

A. The San Fernando Valley spineflower is predominately found within openings of sparsely vegetated scrub communities and grasslands in southern California. There are two known populations of San Fernando Valley spineflower today. One population exists at Laskey Mesa in the Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve in Ventura County and the second population exists on land owned by Newhall Ranch and Farming Company near Santa Clarita in Los Angeles County.

Q. What previous federal action has been taken by the Service?

A. The Service designated the San Fernando Valley spineflower as a candidate species for listing under the ESA in the Candidate Notice of Review on October 25, 1999. The species has remained a candidate for listing since 1999. The Service conducted regular reviews of the species' status, all of which determined the species to be warranted for listing but precluded by other listing activities.

On December 6, 1999, and January 27, 2000, the Service received petitions from the City of Calabasas and from the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, to list the plant as an endangered species under the ESA.

Q. What are the existing and potential threats to the species?

A. In 2015, the Service conducted an assessment of the past, current and future threats to San Fernando spineflower. Those threats include current and future impacts of habitat loss from proposed development, invasive non-native plants and Argentine ants, current and potential effects of having small, isolated populations, and potential impacts of climate change. A combination of these stressors could impact the long-term viability of San Fernando Valley spineflower. More details about primary threats include:

Development

Development consists of converting the landscape into residential, commercial, industrial and recreational features, with associated infrastructure such as roads. Because the Ventura County population of San Fernando Valley spineflower is on permanently protected parkland at the Upper Las Virgenes Open Space Preserve, there is no threat of future development that would impact this population. The Los Angeles County population of the species exists within the footprint of a proposed development project by Newhall Land Company. This proposed development would remove 24 percent of this population and its habitat in Los Angeles County reducing the population from 20.24 acres to 15.40 acres. The proposed development would also fragment existing spineflower habitat, which increases the risk of invasion of non-native plants and Argentine ants and disrupts plant-pollinator interactions. Direct and indirect impacts of the development project threaten the existence of this population.

Non-native Plants and Animals

Non-native invasive grasses, including ripgut brome and purple needlegrass, are abundant within areas adjacent to and within existing San Fernando Valley spineflower habitat and pose a threat to existing spineflower populations. These non-native grasses reduce available habitat and compete for water, soil and light. They also increase the potential for wildfires and can alter pollinator communities.

Non-native animals, particularly the Argentine ant, also pose a threat to the San Fernando Valley spineflower, especially at the Los Angeles County population site. Argentine ants, which are documented at the site and surrounding areas, are known to displace native ants that act as both pollinators and seed dispersers for San Fernando Valley spineflower. Argentine ants are also known to reduce floral visits by bees and thus reduce fruit production by plants. Based on the best available data, ground and aerial pollinators are both likely required for long-term viability of the San Fernando Valley spineflower.

Small, Isolated Populations

Only two populations of San Fernando Valley spineflower are known to exist, which decreases the ability of the species to sustain itself into the future. Historically, the plant was known from no less than ten additional locations across southern California. It is possible that additional populations at historically occupied but currently extirpated sites would decrease the risks associated with having small, isolated populations of the spineflower.

Climate Change

More information is needed to determine impacts of climate on San Fernando Valley spineflower and its habitat. Existing research indicates that drier conditions may result in less suitable habitat or lower germination success in plants and changes in pollinator life cycles. These conditions would also favor greater abundance and distribution of non-native species and increase fire frequency.

Q. How are we working with land managers to help conserve this species?

A. The San Fernando Valley spineflower population in Ventura County exists on state protected and conserved lands that are part of the Upper Las Virgenes Canyon Open Space Preserve, which is managed by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and Mountains Recreation Conservation Authority. The Service is working with land managers to identify and implement conservation and management measures to continue to support this population.

The San Fernando Valley spineflower population in Los Angeles County exists on land owned by Newhall Land and Farming Company. The Service is working with the company to identify opportunities to conserve, protect and mitigate for impacts of proposed development.

The Service will continue to work with land managers where the species occurs in Ventura and Los Angeles counties and our state counterparts, to protect and conserve this rare plant species and its habitat in addition to proposing ESA protections.

Q. What is the purpose of the ESA?

A. When Congress passed the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973, it recognized that our rich natural heritage is of “esthetic, ecological, educational, recreational, and scientific value to our nation and its people.” It further expressed concern that many of our nation’s native plants and animals were in danger of becoming extinct. The purpose of the ESA is to protect and recover imperiled species and the ecosystems upon which they depend.

Q. How does the Service determine whether or not a species should be listed under the ESA?

A. Section 4 of the ESA requires species to be listed as endangered or threatened solely on the basis of their biological status and threats to their existence. When evaluating a species for listing, the Service considers five factors: 1) damage to, or destruction of, a species’ habitat; 2) overutilization of the species for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; 3) disease or predation; 4) inadequacy of existing protection; and 5) other natural or manmade factors that affect the continued existence of the species. When one or more of these factors imperils the survival of a species, the Service takes action to protect it. The Service is required to base its listing decisions on the best scientific information available.

For more information about the listing process:

<https://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/listing.pdf>

https://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/ESA_basics.pdf

Q. When will the Service make a final determination on the species status?

A. The Service is required to make a final determination on the species status within one year of publication of the proposed rule.

Q. Is the Service proposing critical habitat for the species at this time?

A. No, the Service is not proposing critical habitat at this time. The ESA requires the Service to designate critical habitat for listed species to the maximum extent prudent and determinable, and we will make such a determination no later than one year following publication of a final rule.

Q. What information is the Service looking for to help make a final determination?

A. The Service intends that any final action resulting from this proposed rule will be based on the best scientific and commercial data available and be as accurate and as effective as possible. Therefore, we request comments or information from the public, other concerned governmental agencies, Native American tribes, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties concerning this proposed rule. We particularly seek comments concerning:

- (1) San Fernando Valley spineflower biology, range, and population trends, including:
 - (a) Biological or ecological requirements of the species;
 - (b) Genetics and taxonomy;
 - (c) Historical and current range including distribution patterns;
 - (d) Historical and current population levels, and current and projected trends; and
 - (e) Past and ongoing conservation measures for the species, its habitat or both.

(2) Factors that may affect the continued existence of the species, which may include habitat modification or destruction, overutilization, disease, predation, the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms, or other natural or manmade factors.

(3) Biological, commercial trade, or other relevant data concerning any threats (or lack thereof) to this species and existing regulations that may be addressing those threats.

(4) Additional information concerning the historical and current status, range, distribution, and population size of this species, including the locations of any additional populations of this species.

The Service will also seek comments from independent specialists through a peer-review process to ensure the proposed designation is based on scientifically sound data, assumptions, and analyses. The purpose of such review is to ensure that our decisions are based on scientifically sound data, assumptions, and analysis. Accordingly, the final rule and decision may differ from this proposal.

Q. How do I submit comments on the proposed rule?

A. The proposed rule is available today in the Federal Register Reading Room under Docket No. FWS–R8–ES–2016–0078 and will officially publish on September 15, 2016. The Service will accept public comments on the proposal through the next 60 days until November 14, 2016. Comments may be submitted electronically or by hard copy.

(1) *Electronically:* Go to the Federal eRulemaking Portal:

<http://www.regulations.gov>. In the Search box, enter FWS–R8–ES–2016–0078, which is the docket number for this rulemaking. Then, in the Search panel on the left side of the screen, under the Document Type heading, click on the “Proposed Rules” link to locate this document. You may submit a comment by clicking on “Comment Now!”

(2) *By hard copy:* Submit by U.S. mail or hand-delivery to: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS–R8–ES–2016–0078; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041-3803. All comments will be posted on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

Written requests for a public hearing on this proposed rule must be made in writing within 45 days by October 31, 2016. To request a public hearing please contact Mr. Steve Henry, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, 2493 Portola Rd. Suite B, Ventura, California 93003. A copy of the proposed rule and other information about the San Fernando Valley spineflower is available at <http://www.regulations.gov> or at <http://www.fws.gov/ventura>.