



Vandenberg Monkeyflower and Habitat Proposed for Federal Protections

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Description

Vandenberg monkeyflower (*Diplacus vandenbergensis*) is a small annual herb of the Phrymaceae (loosestrife) family found in Santa Barbara County, California. It grows from 0.5 to 10 inches tall and produces one to several yellow flowers on purple-tinted stems. Members of this genus have markings and a petal formation that resemble a face, hence the name “monkeyflower.”

The plant occurs at low elevations and close to the coast in sandy openings (canopy gaps) of maritime chaparral and coastal scrub, mixed with oak woodland and small patches of native grasslands and is almost exclusively found on thin layers of wind-blown sand.

As with other species adapted to California’s Mediterranean climate, the Vandenberg monkeyflower germinates during winter rains between November and February and flowers from late March through June.



Vandenberg monkeyflower
Photo credit: Mary Meyer/CDFW

Vandenberg monkeyflower is only known to occur at nine locations on Burton Mesa, a distinct geographic region located in western Santa Barbara County. The mesa—a series of low, flat-topped hills averaging 400 feet in elevation—is located between the Purisima Hills to the north and the Santa Ynez River to the south. The area on Burton Mesa where the plant currently occurs is crescent-like in shape and approximately 7 miles long by 2 miles wide.

Questions and Answers

Q. What is being proposed?

A. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to protect the Vandenberg monkeyflower as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and proposing to designate approximately 5,785 acres of critical habitat in western Santa Barbara County, California.

Q. What factors does the Service use to determine that a species is endangered or threatened?

A. Under the ESA, the Service can determine that a species is an endangered or threatened species based on any one or a combination of five factors:

1. The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range;
2. Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes;
3. Disease or predation;
4. Inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or
5. Other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence

The ESA requires listing decisions be made solely on the basis of the best available scientific and commercial information.

Q. Why is the Vandenberg monkeyflower being proposed as an endangered species and what are the threats it is facing?

A. The primary threat to Vandenberg monkeyflower and its habitat is the continued presence and expansion of invasive, nonnative plants that are abundant on Burton Mesa, particularly veldt grass (*Ehrharta calycina*), which occurs within or adjacent to all locations where the species is found. Nonnative plants are spreading throughout the mesa, altering the structure of suitable chaparral habitat, and outcompeting the monkeyflower within the sandy openings of Burton Mesa chaparral where it grows.

The plant is also threatened by habitat destruction and fragmentation due to the following: existing and future residential and commercial development, utility and pipeline maintenance activities, recreational activities, modified fire frequencies, small population sizes and climate change.

After careful review and analysis of the best available scientific and commercial information regarding threats to the species, the Service has determined Vandenberg monkeyflower not only has a restricted range, it faces ongoing and future threats and is in danger of extinction throughout all of its range, thus meeting the definition of an endangered species.

Under the ESA, an endangered species is one that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A threatened species is one that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future.

Q. What type of management activities would help limit the impact of threats to Vandenberg Monkeyflower?

A. Management activities that may reduce threats to the species include, but are not limited to: 1). Protecting lands from development in the plant's suitable habitat; 2). Minimizing habitat fragmentation; 3). minimizing the spread of invasive, nonnative plants; 4). limiting authorized casual recreational use to existing paths and trails; 5). controlled burning; and 6). encouraging habitat restoration.

These activities would help decrease the loss of habitat, maintain the appropriate vegetation structure required by the plant and help preserve large areas of contiguous habitat throughout the species' range.

Q. What is Critical Habitat?

A. Critical habitat is a term in the ESA that identifies geographic areas of particular importance to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species. It is designed to protect the essential elements of physical and biological features of a landscape and essential areas that a species needs to survive and reproduce.

Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, preserve, or other conservation area, nor does critical habitat designation impact private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits.

It is a tool to guide federal agencies in fulfilling their conservation responsibilities by requiring them to consult with the Service if their actions may destroy or adversely modify critical habitat for a listed species. Critical habitat requires the Service to gather more detailed information about a species than what is required for listing. This information leads to increased knowledge about the species and its habitat that the Service can share with federal agencies and in turn increases the effectiveness of conservation actions for the species.

The ESA defines "conservation" as the actions leading towards the eventual recovery of a species to the point where it is no longer threatened or endangered.

Q. Where is the Service proposing to designate critical habitat?

A. The Service is proposing to designate critical habitat in areas within the geographical area occupied by Vandenberg monkeyflower at the time of listing that contain the physical and

biological features essential to the conservation of the species and that may require special management considerations or protections.

The specific areas where critical habitat is being proposed are located on Burton Mesa in western Santa Barbara County, California. The Service is proposing one unit (Burton Mesa) that is comprised of four subunits, as critical habitat.

Although Vandenberg monkeyflower has not yet been documented within Subunit 1, the area contains the physical or biological features and habitat characteristic required to sustain the species' life history, and is contiguous with and between Vandenberg Air Force Base lands that are known to be occupied. Because of this, the area within Subunit 1 is considered to be within the geographical area occupied by the species at the time of listing.

Q. Who owns the lands being proposed for critical habitat?

A. Of the approximately 5,785 acres proposed for critical habitat, 4,674 acres are on state lands within the Burton Mesa Ecological Reserve (managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife) and La Purisima Mission State Historical Park (managed by California State Parks) that account for 84 percent of the area proposed and five out of the nine Vandenberg monkeyflower populations. The remaining areas proposed for critical habitat consist of 796 acres on private lands, 38 acres on local agency lands, and 277 acres on Federal Department of Justice lands at the Lompoc Penitentiary.

Vandenberg monkeyflower also occurs in certain areas on Vandenberg Air Force Base. The Service has exempted 4,159 acres of suitable habitat from a critical habitat designation due to the Base's Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan that provides a conservation benefit to the species. The base is managed by the U.S. Air Force.

Additionally, the Service is considering excluding portions of state lands from a critical habitat designation covered by management plans that provide conservation benefits to the Vandenberg monkeyflower, but there are concerns whether funding and staffing will be available to adequately implement the plans to protect the species in the foreseeable future.

Q. Is an economic analysis being prepared for the proposed critical habitat designation?

A. Yes. The Service is preparing an economic impacts analysis of the proposed critical habitat designation and will announce the availability of the draft economic analysis as soon as it is completed. The Service is required to consider potential economic impacts, as well as any other benefits or impacts of designating critical habitat—and may exclude an area if the

benefits of exclusion outweigh the benefits of inclusion, unless it would result in the extinction of the species.

Q. What's the deadline and where do I submit my comments?

A. The Service will be accepting comments through December 30, 2013. Comments may be submitted electronically at the Federal eRulemaking Portal at <http://www.regulations.gov>. The Docket Number for the proposed listing rule is FWS-R8-ES-2013-0078 and for the proposed critical habitat rule is FWS-R8-ES-2013-0049. Comments can also be sent by U.S. mail to:

Public Comments Processing

Attn: FWS-R8-ES-2013-0078 or FWS-R8-ES-2013-0049

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Q. What happens next?

A. The Service will compile and assess all comments received during the public comment period and seek the expert opinions of at least three appropriate and independent specialists with scientific expertise to ensure the determinations are based on scientifically sound data, assumptions, and analyses. The Service will consider all comments and information received during the comment period on these two proposed rules before preparing the final determinations. Accordingly, the final decision may differ from the proposals.