



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
South Florida Ecological Services Office
1339 20th Street
Vero Beach, Florida 32960



NEWS RELEASE

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Contacts: Paul Souza, 772/562-3909 ext. 285
Tom MacKenzie, 404/679-7291

FWS releases final designation of revised critical habitat for the Cape Sable seaside sparrow

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced the publication of a final rule designating critical habitat for the federally endangered Cape Sable seaside sparrow. At the same time, the Service released the final economic analysis associated with the designation.

The Cape Sable seaside sparrow is a subspecies of seaside sparrow that inhabits marl or freshwater wet prairies or tidally influenced brackish marshes in the Everglades region of southern Florida. The sparrow has been federally protected as an endangered species since 1967. This critical habitat revision updates critical habitat for the sparrow first designated in 1977. The Service is making this revision in response to an order by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia to complete a final revision of critical habitat for the Cape Sable seaside sparrow by October 2007.

The final designation identifies the best habitat in the same general areas where it was designated in 1977, but refines the boundaries of the designation to more specifically identify those habitats that sparrows use. It also eliminates several large areas of unsuitable habitat from the designation. The previous critical habitat boundary followed section, township, and range boundaries, whereas the new critical habitat designation is specifically tailored to include the areas containing habitat features that sparrows rely upon. Overall, the final rule designates 84,865 acres as critical habitat, an area that supports about 95 percent of the sparrow population today.

The Service excluded an area west of Shark River Slough from the critical habitat designation. New information suggests at least some parts of this area may have historically resembled a sawgrass marsh, which is not the species' habitat of choice today or historically. In addition, up-to-date modeling for Everglades restoration projects indicates this area will become wetter to some degree as Everglades restoration progresses. Some locations may revert to conditions that

do not support sparrow habitat, and others may emerge and provide conditions that support the species. Given this uncertainty, the Service does not believe designating fixed habitat lines in this area is a sensible restoration and recovery strategy.

The areas supporting sparrows west of Shark River Slough fall exclusively within the boundaries of Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades National Park. As a result, these locations will continue to receive significant protections now and in the future even without the critical habitat designation. In addition, the Service will carefully review any impacts from any future proposals in this location under the Endangered Species Act to avoid and minimize impacts to the sparrow to the maximum degree possible. The final designation also included other minor changes, including small modifications to the boundaries of two proposed units, clarification and modification of definitions of the primary constituent elements, and changes to critical habitat unit names.

“The best available science indicates there is strong evidence that Everglades restoration will benefit sparrows when it is complete,” said Paul Souza, Field Supervisor for the Service’s South Florida Ecological Services Office, “but it is not completely clear what the future conditions will be in the habitat west of Shark River Slough. As a result, a static boundary description of critical habitat does not work in this case and could even have the unintended consequence of limiting restoration. We remain committed to working with our partners to ensure the sparrow reaps the full benefits of restoration as our historic partnership to restore America’s Everglades continues. This decision relies upon the best science available today, designates critical habitat in the areas that support 95 percent of the sparrow population, and will allow a key aspect of sparrow recovery – Everglades restoration – to move forward.”

“We received many helpful comments from the public, resource management agencies, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, and other organizations during the two public comment periods and one public hearing associated with this designation,” Souza said. “These comments assisted us in fully considering the issues associated with designation, and we are grateful for the extensive input and shared commitment to Everglades restoration and imperiled species recovery.”

“We look forward to continuing to work with our partners at the Fish and Wildlife Service to conserve the sparrow and restore the Everglades. This critical habitat designation is consistent with our historic effort to restore this important ecosystem,” said Dan Kimball, superintendent of Everglades National Park.

The final revised critical habitat designation includes lands owned and managed by the National Park Service, South Florida Water Management District, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act of 1973 identifying geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species that may require special management considerations or protection. Federal agencies that undertake, fund, or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

When determining areas to designate as critical habitat, the Service considers physical and biological features that are essential to the conservation of the species. These features may include space for individual and population growth and for normal behavior; cover or shelter; food, water, air; sites for breeding and rearing offspring; and habitats that are protected from disturbances or are representative of the historic geographical and ecological distributions of a species. As part of designating critical habitat, the Service also takes into account the economic impact, as well as any other relevant impacts, of specifying any particular area as critical habitat.

The Service may exclude any area from critical habitat if it is determined that the benefits of excluding it outweigh the benefits of specifying the area as a part of critical habitat, unless it is determined that the failure to designate the area as critical habitat will result in the extinction of the species.

The final Economic Analysis estimates potential future costs associated with conservation efforts for the sparrow in areas designated to be \$32.2 million over the next 20 years. The present value of these impacts is \$26.9 million, using a discount rate of three percent, or \$22.2 million, using a discount rate of seven percent. The annualized value of these impacts is \$1.8 million, using a discount rate of three percent, or \$2.1 million, using a discount rate of seven percent. The final economic analysis also includes an evaluation of incremental impacts of critical habitat designation (those additional impacts that result from the designation above and beyond the impacts associated with other conservation efforts), and estimates these impacts to be \$64,000 over 20 years. These incremental impacts result from additional administrative effort in considering adverse modification in Section 7 consultations.

The economic analysis identifies most of the total potential costs (58 percent) estimated are associated with species management efforts such as surveying and monitoring, research, exotic vegetation control, and similar activities. The remaining costs are associated with potential water management changes to conserve the sparrow, fire management, and administrative costs. Costs from this proposal associated with water management activities are calculated for only the next five years.

To see the final rule, maps of the final units, the final economic analysis, and additional information about the designation, visit: <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/>. For more information, contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, South Florida Ecological Services Office at 1339 20th Street, Vero Beach, Florida, 32960, phone (772) 562-3909.

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