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Service Proposes to Protect Three South Florida Plants Under the Endangered Species Act

Agency Seeks Information from the Public, Scientific Community Before Making Final Decision

Current evidence suggests that two wild cacti, Florida semaphore cactus and aboriginal prickly-apple, and an herb, Cape Sable thoroughwort, are in danger of becoming extinct in the foreseeable future, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. As a result, the Service is proposing to protect these species under the Endangered Species Act, and is seeking new information from the public and the scientific community that will assist the agency in making a final determination.

At the same time, the Service is proposing to designate critical habitat for the Cape Sable thoroughwort in locations where the species currently exists or historically existed and could be reintroduced. These areas consist of nine critical habitat units encompassing 8,800 acres in Monroe and Miami-Dade counties, Florida. Of the total acreage identified, 62 percent is located on federal lands, 32 percent on state lands, and eight percent on city, county, and private lands. Included within the designation are areas in Everglades National Park, Key Largo, Upper and Lower Matecumbe Keys, Lignumvitae Key, Long Key, Big Pine Key, Big Munson Island, and Boca Grande Key. Most of the designated lands are protected as federal, state, and local government areas. Big Munson Island is the largest private parcel and is owned by the Boy Scouts of America.

The cacti and herb may be found in a variety of Florida's tropical habitats including rockland hammocks (hardwood forests on upland sites in areas where limestone is near the surface and often exposed); hardwood hammocks (dense stand of broad-leafed trees on an elevated, well-drained site); maritime hammocks (coastal upland wooded areas dominated by hardwoods); buttonwood forests (transitional areas dominated by shrubby buttonwood trees); coastal rock barrens (flatlands with exposed limestone); coastal berms (forest or shrub thickets found on long, narrow, storm-deposited ridges of loose sediment); coastal strands (coastal areas dominated by vines and grasses, on wind deposited, sandy soils); and coastal grasslands.

The most significant threat to the two cacti is poaching. For example, there is currently a demand for the fragrant prickly-apple, another cactus already federally-listed as endangered, that closely resembles the aboriginal prickly-apple. The Florida semaphore cactus also faces predation by a non-native insect known as the cactus moth.

Threats to all three plants include habitat loss, sea level rise, small and isolated populations, low genetic diversity, and competition from non-native plant species.

The Service first identified the Florida semaphore cactus as a candidate for ESA protection in 1985. The aboriginal prickly-apple was first identified in 2006 and the Cape Sable thoroughwort

was first identified in 1999. The historic range for all three plants has been reduced by an estimated 50 percent, and they continue to experience habitat loss and modification due to development and nonnative species.

The ESA requires the Service to identify the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species, which the ESA terms “critical habitat.” This identification helps federal agencies identify actions that may affect listed species or their habitat, and to work with the Service to avoid or minimize those impacts. Identifying this habitat also helps raise awareness of the habitat needs of imperiled species and focus the conservation efforts of other partners such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual landowners.

Although non-federal lands have initially been included in these areas, activities on these lands are not affected now, and will not necessarily be affected if the species is protected under the ESA in the future. Only if an activity is authorized, funded, or carried out by a federal agency will the agency need to work with the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce, or mitigate potential impacts to listed species or to ensure actions do not adversely modify critical habitat. In addition, public and private landowners still must comply with other provisions of the ESA to protect threatened and endangered species on their lands. The Service relies on a number of voluntary, non-regulatory conservation programs to provide willing landowners with assurances to protect them for the work they do on their lands.

Today’s proposal is part of the Service’s effort to implement a court-approved work plan that resolves a series of lawsuits concerning the agency’s ESA Listing Program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce litigation-driven workloads and allow the agency to focus its resources on the species most in need of the ESA’s protections over the next five years.

The final decision to add these three plant species to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, as well as the final identification of areas containing habitat essential to the species, will be based on the best scientific information available. In addition, the Service will utilize an economic analysis to inform and refine its identification of this habitat. Only areas that contain habitat essential to the conservation of the species, and where the benefits of this habitat outweigh potential economic impacts will be included in the final identification.

The Service opened a 60-day public comment period today via the Federal Register to allow the public to review and comment on the proposal and provide additional information. All relevant information received from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties will be considered and addressed in the agency’s final listing determination for the species and identification of habitat essential to its conservation.

Comments and information may be submitted by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments on Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2012-0076.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2012-0076, Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 North

Fairfax Drive, Suite 222, Arlington, VA 22203. All comments, including personal information, will be available on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

Comments must be received on or before December 10, 2012. Requests for a public hearing concerning the proposed critical habitat designation for the Cape Sable thoroughwort must be made in writing by November 26, 2012, to the Arlington, VA, address shown above.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>

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