

NEWS RELEASE

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes to List Two South Florida Butterflies as “Endangered” and to Designate Critical Habitat for Both

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to list the Florida leafwing and Bartram’s scrub-hairstreak as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

At the same time, the Service also is proposing to designate critical habitat for both butterflies which are only found in South Florida.

“We are taking these actions, as required by the law, for these rare butterflies and the important habitats they need to support their recovery,” said Cindy Dohner, the Service’s Southeast Regional Director.

The Service is seeking new information from the public and the scientific community that will help in making a final determination about the proposed listing and critical habitat designation. Both butterflies have been candidates for federal listing since 2006.

The proposed listing and designation of critical habitat for these butterflies 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 Service proposes to designate critical habitat for these butterflies in locations where they currently exist or historically existed and could be reintroduced. These areas consist of four critical habitat units encompassing 8,285 acres for the leafwing and seven critical habitat units encompassing 9,261 acres for the hairstreak. All units are within Monroe and Miami-Dade Counties.

Included within the designation are areas in Everglades National Park and other areas in Miami-Dade County, and Big Pine Key, No Name Key, and Little Pine Key, which are part National Key Deer Refuge in Monroe County. Most of the designated lands are protected as federal, state, and local government conservation areas.

When a species is proposed for listing as endangered or threatened under the ESA, the Service must consider whether there are areas of habitat it believes are essential to the species’ conservation. Those areas may be proposed for designation as critical habitat.

The Service will decide whether to extend ESA protection for these butterflies after evaluating all available information. The Service is seeking information on distribution and threats to these butterflies and their habitats. If the two butterflies are listed under the ESA and critical habitat is designated, the Service will work cooperatively with partners to conserve their habitats. In addition, federal agencies would need to ensure activities they authorize, fund, or carry out are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of these butterflies or result in the destruction or adverse modification designated critical habitat.

Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. Critical habitat designation does not impose restrictions on non-federal lands unless federal funds, permits, or activities are involved. Designating critical habitat on federal or non-federal lands informs landowners and the public of the specific areas that are important to the conservation of the species.

Identifying this habitat also helps focus the conservation efforts of other conservation partners, such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individuals. The designation of critical habitat on private land has no impact on private landowner activities that do not require federal funding or federal permits. The designation of critical habitat is only applicable to federal activities.

Both butterflies live in pine rockland habitat, specifically in areas with pineland croton, with their shared host plant. The Florida leafwing and Bartram's scrub-hairstreak have been eliminated from the majority of their former ranges. Historically, these butterflies ranged in the pine rocklands of Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties, while occasionally straying further north in the state.

Presently the Florida leafwing only lives in Everglades National Park. The Bartram's scrub-hairstreak lives on Big Pine Key in Monroe County and in Everglades National Park, as well as locally in conservation lands throughout Miami-Dade County. The estimated range-wide population densities for these butterflies vary considerably from year-to-year, but generally are in the low hundreds.

Although remaining Florida leafwing and Bartram's scrub-hairstreak populations survive almost entirely within conservation lands, a wide array of natural and human-influenced threats remain. Habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation, natural fire suppression --combined with limited prescribed burns or mechanical clearing -- are the most imminent threats to these butterflies and their host plant. Additional threats to both butterflies are poaching, pesticide use, sea level rise, small and isolated populations, and low genetic diversity. Parasitism, predation, and disease also have substantially influenced existing populations from year-to-year, contributing to their vulnerability.

Public comments on these proposed rules can be submitted through October 15, 2013. Requests for a public hearing must be made in writing by September 30, 2013. To request a public hearing, please contact Mr. Mark Salvato, South Florida Ecological Services Office, 1339 20th

Street, Vero Beach, FL, 32960, by telephone at 772-469-4340, or email at Mark_Salvato@fws.gov.

Comments should 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-2013-0084, for the proposed listing and FWS-R4-ES-2013-0031, for the proposed critical habitat designation.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2013-0084, for the proposed listing and FWS-R4-ES-2013-0031, for the proposed critical habitat designation, 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 made be available on <http://www.regulations.gov>.

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