

July 14, 2014

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Service Announces Draft Economic Analysis for Florida Brickell-bush and Carter's Small-flowered Flax Proposed Critical Habitat Designation

VERO BEACH, Fla. – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is announcing the draft economic analysis for a proposed critical habitat designation for two perennial herbs - Florida brickell-bush and Carter's small-flowered flax. At the same time, the Service is re-opening the comment period on the plants' critical habitat designation. The public is invited to submit comments on both actions through a 30-day comment period ending August 14, 2014.

Both plants are only found on the Miami Rock Ridge in South Florida. The critical habitat proposed for these two plants overlap, for a combined total of about 2,723 acres. The plants' proposed critical habitat designation includes lands in pine rockland habitat on the Miami Rock Ridge, outside of Everglades National Park, in Miami-Dade County, Florida. Areas within the designation include occupied and unoccupied, but suitable, habitat within the plants' historical ranges.

Most of the historical pine rockland habitat on the Miami Rock Ridge has been developed or converted to agriculture, and much of the remaining areas are degraded due to inadequate fire management and proliferation of non-native invasive plants. A potential threat to both plants is sea level rise.

Current populations of these plants are between 2,150 to 3,700 plants for Florida brickell-bush, and about 1,300 plants for Carter's small-flowered flax. Compared to their historical ranges, the current range of Florida brickell-bush has shrunk by at least 13 percent, and the current range of Carter's small-flowered flax has decreased about 30 percent.

The draft economic analysis estimates the total economic costs of the proposed critical habitat designation for these plants are largely administrative and are not likely to exceed \$120,000 in 2013 dollars in a single year.

These two pine rockland plants have been candidates for federal listing since 1999. Both plants were proposed for listing as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) with a critical habitat designation on October 3, 2013. A final listing decision is pending. The proposed listing of these plants with critical habitat and the associated economic analysis are part of the Service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan aimed at addressing a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA listing program. To learn more about the Service's work plan for 2014, please visit <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/>

Under the ESA, critical habitat identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the species' conservation. Although some of the areas within the proposed critical habitat designation are located on private land, activities on these lands will not be affected unless activities on these lands are authorized, funded, or carried out by a federal agency. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. If federal funds are involved in a project in the area, the government agency will need to consult the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to the plant or to ensure actions do not negatively affect these plants or modify their critical habitat.

Federal agencies are required to make a special effort at conservation when they work in an area designated as critical habitat for a listed species. The economic analysis estimates the cost of consultations with the Service when a federal agency does work in an area designated as critical habitat, or funds or permits work done by others. Federal, state, and local government agencies and some projects may incur costs for work involving federal funding or a federal permit. The estimate does not include any costs incurred as a result of the proposed listing because the ESA states that the listing of a species is to be based solely on the best available scientific information.

Written comments on the draft economic analysis and these plants' proposed critical habitat designation can be e-mailed by August 14, 2014 to <http://www.regulations.gov>, ATTN: FWS-R4-ES-2013-0108. For more information, please visit the website <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/>

The Service offers willing landowners a number of voluntary and non-regulatory conservation programs to help these plants survive as they live and work on their lands. Landowners interested in helping the Service recover these two plants, or seeking more information about the potential implications of the proposed critical habitat designation should contact Mr. Ken Warren, South Florida Ecological Services Office, 1339 20th Street, Vero Beach, Florida, 32960, by telephone at 772-469-3909, ext. 323, or e-mail at Ken_Warren@fws.gov

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