

Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Critical Habitat for Two South Florida Cacti

January 22, 2015

VERO BEACH, Fla. – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public comment on its proposal to designate critical habitat for the Florida semaphore cactus and the aboriginal prickly-apple under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Both plants were listed as endangered on November 25, 2013.

At the same time, the Service has prepared a draft economic analysis for the proposed critical habitat designations. The public is invited to submit comments on the proposed critical habitat designations and/or the draft economic analysis through a 60-day comment period ending March 23, 2015.

The proposed critical habitat designations for these two endangered cacti and the associated draft economic analysis are part of the Service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan under a Multi-District Listing Agreement aimed at addressing a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA listing program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce a litigation-driven workload. For more information, please see <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/>

About 4,411 acres are proposed as critical habitat for the Florida semaphore cactus in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties, and 3,444 acres are proposed as critical habitat for the aboriginal prickly-apple in Manatee, Charlotte, Sarasota and Lee Counties. All Florida semaphore cactus proposed critical habitat units are occupied. Nine of 11 aboriginal prickly apple proposed units are occupied. Two unoccupied critical habitat units are part of the prickly apple's historical range and have suitable habitat for the plant's reintroduction.

The current range of Florida semaphore cactus includes two naturally occurring populations and five reintroduced populations. These populations account for fewer than 1,500 plants and all are located on conservation lands. Wild populations remain on Swan Key in Biscayne National Park and Little Torch Key on a Nature Conservancy property. Wild populations on Key Largo and Big Pine Key in the Florida Keys were lost more than a decade ago by development and collecting by cactus enthusiasts. Reintroduced populations are located on Key Largo, Lower Saddlebunch Key, Big Pine Key and Upper Sugarloaf Key on state and federal lands. Threats of poaching and vandalism, predation by a nonnative moth, disease, competition from nonnative, invasive plant species and wildfire, and habitat loss still exist in the remaining populations. Additionally, low genetic diversity and lack of sexual reproduction are threats to Florida semaphore cactus.

The current range of aboriginal prickly-apple includes 12 populations in seven public and private conservation areas, as well as four county parcels not managed for conservation and at least three unprotected private parcels. In total, the species was represented by an estimated 300 to 500 individuals in 2007, when population sizes were last estimated. Populations previously known from Terra Ceia in Manatee County and Cayo Costa Island in Lee County are no longer found in these areas. Threats of poaching, competition from nonnative, invasive plant species, wildfire, disease, predation, vandalism and habitat loss still exist in the remaining populations.

The draft economic analysis estimates the total economic costs of the proposed critical habitat designation for the Florida semaphore cactus is not likely to exceed \$7,100 in 2014 dollars in a single year.

For the aboriginal prickly-apple, the Service anticipates only administrative costs in the proposed critical habitat area occupied by the plant. These administrative costs are not likely to exceed \$7,000 in 2014 dollars in a given year. Adding the costs of consultations and minor conservation efforts in both the proposed critical habitat area occupied by the prickly-apple and the proposed area of suitable, but presently unoccupied, critical habitat, the estimate would not exceed \$67,000 in 2014 dollars in a given year.

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 they 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 or authorization 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 plants or to ensure actions do not negatively affect these plants or their critical habitat.

Because critical habitat applies only to federal actions, the economic analysis primarily estimates the cost of consultations with the Service when a federal agency authorizes, funds, or carries out work in an area designated as critical habitat. The Service, as well as the consulting 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.

The Service will accept comments concerning the proposed critical habitat designations for these two cacti and/or the draft economic analysis that are received or postmarked on or before March 23, 2015. To submit comments electronically, please go to the Federal eRulemaking Portal <http://www.regulations.gov>. In the Search box, enter FWS-R4-ES-2014-0057, which is the docket number for this rulemaking. Then, in the Search panel on the left side of the screen, under the Document Type heading, click on the Proposed Rules link to locate this document. You may submit a comment by clicking on "Comment Now!" If you prefer, you can mail or hand-deliver comments to: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2014-0057, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041-3803.

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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