

News Release

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Listing Four South Florida Plants as Threatened or Endangered

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- Four plants only found in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties are being proposed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for listing as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A shrub, Big Pine partridge pea, and two herbs, wedge spurge and sand flax, are being proposed for endangered status. Another shrub, Blodgett's silverbush, is being proposed for threatened status.

"The populations of these four plants have declined about 80 percent over the past two decades," said Cindy Dohner, Southeast Region Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Habitat loss and habitat modification are the primary threats these plants face."

The populations of these plants are small and isolated because most of the surrounding habitat has been developed. While they occur on a mix of public and private land in these two counties, the bulk of the remaining populations are on public lands.

Big Pine partridge pea, wedge spurge, sand flax, and Blodgett's silverbush, are part of the imperiled pine rockland flora found only in the United States in extreme south Florida and the Lower Florida Keys. Big Pine partridge pea is currently found on two islands in the Florida Keys (Big Pine Key and Cudjoe Key), both of which are part of the National Key Deer Refuge. Also, wedge spurge is currently found only on Big Pine Key and has never been recorded elsewhere. Sand flax occurs in pine rocklands and adjacent disturbed areas in the Lower Florida Keys and Miami-Dade County. Blodgett's silverbush occurs primarily in pine rocklands, but also on the edges of hardwood hammock, coastal berm, and adjacent disturbed areas in the Florida Keys and Miami-Dade County.

Under the ESA, a plant or animal can be listed as endangered, meaning it's in danger of becoming extinct, or threatened, which is one likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. Federally-listed plants are not protected from damage, collection, movement, or destruction (take) on non-federal lands. However, it is illegal to collect or maliciously harm them on federal land. Federal agencies would need to ensure activities they authorize, fund, or carry out, whether on public or private land, are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of these plants. The plants also are protected from commercial trade.

These four plants are listed on the State of Florida's Regulated Plant Index (Index) as endangered. This listing provides little or no habitat protection beyond the state's development of a regional impact process, which discloses impacts from projects but provides no regulatory protection for state-listed plants on private lands.

The proposed listing of these plants is 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 2015, please visit <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation>.

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 for the four plants. If these plants are listed under the ESA, the Service will continue to work with partners such as the State of Florida, Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties, Fairchild Botanical Gardens, the Institute for Regional Conservation and Homestead Air Reserve Base to conserve their habitat.

Some conservation actions for these plants are already ongoing. In 1979, Miami-Dade County enacted the Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) Covenant Program, which reduces taxes for private landowners of natural forest communities (NFCs; pine rocklands and tropical hardwood hammocks) who agree not to develop their property and manage it for a period of 10 years, with the option to renew for additional 10-year periods. Although these temporary conservation easements provide valuable protection for their duration, they are voluntary agreements and not regulatory in nature.

The EEL Program purchases and manages lands for preservation. To date, the EEL Program has acquired about 775 acres of pine rocklands, and 236 acres of rockland hammocks. The EEL Program manages another 777 acres of pine rocklands, and 1,578 acres of tropical hardwood and rockland hammocks owned by the Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Department including some of the largest remaining areas of pine rocklands habitat on the Miami Rock Ridge outside of Everglades National Park.

The Service has programs to control nonnative plants at National Key Deer Refuge and Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The State of Florida and the Service jointly manage the many islands that make up National Key Deer Refuge.

In Everglades National Park, the National Park Service manages Long Pine Key, largest remaining stand of pine rocklands. Prescribed fire and nonnative species control efforts are ongoing there. Only Blodgett's silverbush occurs within Everglades National Park.

Critical habitat designations are being considered for each of these plants, and will be proposed later. A draft economic analysis of the pending proposed critical habitat designations is being prepared.

Public comments on the proposed listings of these plants can be submitted for the next 60 days through November 30, 2015. Requests for a public hearing must be made in writing by November 13, 2015. To request a public hearing, please contact Ken Warren, South Florida Ecological Services Field Office, at 1339 20th Street, Vero Beach, Florida, 32960-3559; phone at 772-469-4323, or e-mail at ken_warren@fws.gov.

Comments on the proposed listing should be submitted by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> - Follow the instructions for submitting comments on Docket Number FWS-R4-ES-2015-0137.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Docket Number FWS-R4-ES-2015-0137, 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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