

Frequently Asked Questions

Florida Bristle Fern Proposed Critical Habitat

Q: Why is critical habitat proposed for the Florida bristle fern?

A: The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires the Service to designate critical habitat for listed species if prudent and determinable. The Florida bristle fern was listed as endangered under the ESA in October 2015. Based on the best available science, the Service has determined that critical habitat is both prudent and determinable for the Florida bristle fern.

There are two known metapopulations (a metapopulation consists of a group of geographically separated populations of the same species that interact at some level): one in South Florida (Miami-Dade County) and one in Central Florida (Sumter County). The South Florida metapopulation is composed of four known populations in primarily rockland hammocks, all on Miami-Dade county-managed conservation lands (Castellow Hammock, Hattie Bauer Hammock, Fuchs Hammock, and Meissner Hammock). The Central Florida metapopulation is composed of two known populations, both in small mesic hammocks on state-owned land in the Jumper Creek Tract of the Withlacoochee State Forest.

Historically, the Florida bristle fern was found in an additional nine hammocks in South Florida, from Royal Palm Hammock in Everglades National Park to Matheson Hammock near Pinecrest. In Central Florida, the fern was historically found in as many as seven additional locations in the vicinity of Floral City and Wahoo. All of these historical populations no longer exist, and the fern's range has been vastly reduced, primarily due to land conversion and development, canal installation, and the impacts of local and regional drainage.

Q: How does a critical habitat designation affect private landowners?

A: Designating critical habitat under the ESA has no impact on individual landowner activities unless they also involve federal agency activities or require federal funding or permits. Additionally, it does not affect land ownership or establish a wildlife refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation areas, nor does it allow the government or public to access private lands.

Q: How long does the public comment period last? What is the next step after it ends?

A: There will be a 60-day public comment period on this action. The Service is particularly interested in comments concerning the amount and distribution of Florida bristle fern and its habitat, what may constitute physical or biological features essential to the fern's conservation (specifically those related to canopy cover, humidity and moisture levels, and minimum habitat amounts), suitability of proposed areas and other areas which may meet the definition of critical habitat, and the draft economic analysis. At the conclusion of the comment period, we will begin the process of reviewing comments received and decide whether or not to pursue this proposal in the form of a final rule.

Q: How much land is being proposed for this designation and where is it?

A: The proposed critical habitat designation consists of 4,014 acres of occupied and unoccupied habitat in nine parcels in Sumter and Miami-Dade counties. Of this, 344 acres are comprised of rockland/tropical hammocks in Miami-Dade County and 3,680 acres are in the Jumper Creek Tract of Withlacoochee State Forest and adjacent lands in Sumter County.

For the South Florida population, there are three occupied (129 acres) and four unoccupied (205 acres) critical habitat parcels. For the central Florida population, there is one occupied (1,834 acres) parcel and one unoccupied (1,846 acres) parcel. Within the entire proposed critical habitat, the vast majority of land (92 percent) is under state ownership, with just 4 percent federally owned, three percent county-owned and one percent privately owned.

Q: Are the lands being proposed for critical habitat designation occupied or unoccupied by the Florida bristle fern?

A: See the information provided in the table below showing name, occupancy (O = occupied, U = unoccupied), area, and land ownership of proposed critical habitat parcels for Florida bristle fern. Area estimates reflect all land within critical habitat parcel boundaries. All areas rounded to the nearest whole hectare (ha) and acre (ac). Ownership information is based on Miami-Dade County parcel data (2017) and Sumter County parcel data (2019).

Rockland/Tropical Hammocks of South Florida, Miami-Dade County						
Parcel	Occupancy	Federal ha (ac)	State ha (ac)	County ha (ac)	Private/Other ha (ac)	Total ha (ac)
Matheson Hammock* (SF 1)	U	0	0	16 (39)	0	16 (39)
Snapper Creek* (SF 2)	U	0	3 (8)	0	0	3 (8)
Castellow and Ross* Hammocks (SF 3)	O	0	13 (32)	25 (61)	0	38 (93)
Silver Palm Hammock* (SF 4)	U	0	4 (10)	0	0	4 (10)
Hattie Bauer Hammock (SF 5)	O	0	0	3 (8)	0	3 (8)
Fuchs and Meissner Hammocks (SF 6)	O	0	2 (5)	9 (23)	0	11 (28)
Royal Palm Hammock*	U	60 (148)	0	0	0	60 (148)

(SF 7)						
South Florida Total		60 (148)	22 (55)	53 (131)	0	135 (334)
Withlacoochee State Forest, Jumper Creek Tract, and adjacent lands of Central Florida, Sumter County						
Parcel	Occupancy	Federal ha (ac)	State ha (ac)	County ha (ac)	Private/Other ha (ac)	Total ha (ac)
CF1	O	0	726 (1795)	0	16 (39)	742 (1834)
CF 2*	U	0	747 (1846)	0	0	747 (1846)
Central Florida Total		0	1473 (3641)	0	16 (39)	1489 (3680)
Total South and Central Florida		60 (148)	1495 (3696)	53 (131)	16 (39)	1624 (4014)

Q: What does a critical habitat designation mean?

A: Critical habitat is a term under the ESA to refer to specific geographic areas that contain features essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management or protection. Critical habitat may include areas that are not currently occupied by the species but are essential for its conservation.

Q: How does the Service determine what areas to designate as critical habitat?

A: Within areas occupied by the species, Service biologists consider physical and biological features that the species needs to survive and reproduce. These features include:

- Space for individual and population growth and for normal behavior;
- Cover or shelter;
- Food, water, air, light, minerals, or other nutritional or physiological requirements; and
- Sites for breeding, reproduction, rearing of offspring, germination or seed dispersal.

Unoccupied areas are determined based on documented historical occurrence.

Q: Does a critical habitat designation affect all activities that occur within the designated area?

A: No. A critical habitat designation does not necessarily restrict activities. It is a reminder to federal agencies that they must make special efforts to protect the important characteristics of designated areas. Activities that involve a federal permit, license, or funding, or engage on-the-ground activities of a federal agency, and are likely to destroy or adversely modify the area of critical habitat, are affected. If this is the case, we work through a formal consultation process with the agency and, where appropriate, with private or other landowners to amend their project

to allow it to proceed without adversely affecting the critical habitat. Thus, most projects are likely to go forward; some are modified to minimize harm to critical habitat.

Q: What does the draft economic analysis mean to private landowners in the area?

A: The economic analysis is comprehensive and considers the economic costs of designating critical habitat. The economic analysis indicates that the proposed designation would not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small business entities.