

Department of the Interior  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office  
2730 Loker Avenue West  
Carlsbad, California 92008  
Phone: 760-431-9440  
Fax: 760-431-9624

# News Release



SC-G

02-012

Contact: John Stephenson, Karen Evans, or Jane Hendron, Carlsbad, California - 760/431-9440

February 12, 2002

## U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES CRITICAL HABITAT FOR FIVE PLANTS IN THE SAN BERNARDINO MOUNTAINS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today published a proposal to designate 13,180 acres of land as critical habitat for five plants found only in the San Bernardino Mountains of southern California. The five plants are the federally endangered Cushenbury milk-vetch (*Astragalus albens*), Cushenbury buckwheat (*Eriogonum ovalifolium* var. *vineum*), San Bernardino Mountains bladderpod (*Lesquerella kingii* ssp. *bernardina*), and Cushenbury oxytheca (*Oxytheca parishii* var. *goodmaniana*), and the federally threatened Parish's daisy (*Erigeron parishii*).

The five plant species are collectively referred to as carbonate plants because they grow primarily on soils that are derived from limestone, dolomite, or other substrates rich in calcium carbonate. The area of the San Bernardino Mountains in which the plants are found is known as the carbonate belt because it contains outcroppings of primarily limestone and dolomite in a series of bands that run east to west along the desert-facing slopes of the mountains. This area is mined for limestone and calcium carbonate.

Approximately 86 percent of the areas proposed as critical habitat are on federal land, most of which is managed by the U.S. Forest Service's San Bernardino National Forest. A small portion of land proposed as critical habitat is managed by the Bureau of Land Management and 1,900 acres is under private ownership.

The Service is working with the Forest Service, BLM, and mining interests to develop and implement a Carbonate Habitat Management Strategy to address the long-term conservation of carbonate habitat in the San Bernardino Mountains. A Draft San Bernardino Mountains Carbonate Endemic Plants Recovery Plan was published in 1997 that identified actions needed to conserve and recover the carbonate plants.

"Areas we have proposed as critical habitat for these plants are included within the larger planning area of the Management Strategy and are discussed in the Draft Recovery Plan", said Jim Bartel, field supervisor of the Service's Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office. "Identifying specific areas as critical habitat will help in developing the Management Strategy because it focuses attention on what is essential for the long-term conservation and recovery of the plants."

The areas proposed as critical habitat are separated into three units:

**Unit 1:** This unit covers approximately 11,982 acres extending from the western edge of White Mountain to the eastern edge of Rattlesnake Canyon, and contains populations of Cushenbury milk-vetch, Cushenbury buckwheat, and Cushenbury oxytheca, and Parish's daisy.

**Unit 2:** Located on the north side of Big Bear Lake, adjacent to Big Bear City, this unit includes about 684 acres. Populations of Cushenbury buckwheat and San Bernardino Mountains bladderpod are contained in this unit.

**Unit 3:** Totaling about 514 acres, this is the smallest of the proposed critical habitat units. All lands within this unit are managed by the Forest Service. The San Bernardino Mountains bladderpod is the only carbonate plant found in this unit.

The areas proposed as critical habitat do not include existing features and structures, such as buildings, active mines, roads, paved or cleared areas, lawns, or other urban landscaped areas that do not contain one or more of the primary constituent elements essential to the life cycle needs of the plants. Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. These areas do not necessarily have to be occupied by the species at the time of designation. An area designated as critical habitat is not a refuge, preserve or special conservation area. Listed species and their habitat are protected by the Endangered Species Act whether or not they are in an area designated as critical habitat.

The Service listed the five carbonate plants under the Endangered Species Act on August 24, 1994, due to declining populations and the loss, alteration, and fragmentation of habitat associated with mining activities. Critical habitat was not designated at the time the five carbonate plants were listed because scientists determined that a designation would likely increase threats of vandalism or collection of the plants or other human activities that could harm them.

On June 15, 2000, the California Native Plant Society filed a lawsuit in the Federal District Court for the Southern District of California for the Service's failure to designate critical habitat for these plants and the Service was subsequently ordered to reevaluate the prudence of designating critical habitat and publish a determination by January 31, 2002. Today's proposal is a result of that reevaluation.

The Cushenbury milk-vetch is a member of the pea family. It is typically found on carbonate soils along rocky washes and gentle slopes within pinyon woodland, pinyon-juniper woodland, Joshua tree woodland, and blackbush scrub communities. Populations of the plant are scattered along the eastern portion of the carbonate belt from Dry Canyon southeast to the head of Lone Valley.

Cushenbury buckwheat is a member of the buckwheat family. It grows in low, dense mats that are typically six to 10 inches in diameter, but can reach 20 inches in diameter. The plant blooms from May to June; the flowers are whitish-cream colored, but can darken to a reddish or purple hue with age. Populations of this plant are scattered along the carbonate belt from White Mountain east to Rattlesnake Canyon.

The San Bernardino Mountains bladderpod is a member of the mustard family that grows four to eight inches high and produces yellow flowers that bloom between May and June. The bladderpod grows on dolomite soils and has the most restricted geographic range of the five carbonate plants.

Cushenbury oxytheca is a small, wiry member of the buckwheat family. It is found in scattered populations from the White Mountain east to Rattlesnake Canyon. This plant is an annual and usually grows two to 12 inches tall and produces six-petaled flowers that may be white, rose or greenish-yellow.

Parish's daisy is a small perennial herb in the aster family. The plant typically grows four to 12 inches high and flowers from May through June. Parish's daisy is generally found growing in limestone or dolomite soils and has the widest distribution of the five carbonate plants.

Native plants are important for their ecological, economic and aesthetic values. Plants produce the oxygen we breathe and play an important role in development of crops that resist disease, insects and drought. At least 25 percent of prescription drugs contain ingredients derived from plant compounds, including medicine used to treat cancer, heart disease, juvenile leukemia, and malaria, as well as that used to assist organ transplants. The decline of plant species is an indicator of the health of the environment.

\_\_\_\_\_The Endangered Species Act does not provide any greater protection to listed plants on private lands than they already receive under state law. The Endangered Species Act also does not prohibit "take" of listed plants on private lands, but landowners must still comply with state laws protecting imperiled plants. Landowners who may have these plants on their property are encouraged to contact the California Department of Fish and Game for further guidance.

A complete description of the Service's proposal to designate critical habitat for five carbonate plants was published in today's *Federal Register*. Data and comments on all aspects of this proposal, including data on economic or other impacts of designating any area as critical habitat for the carbonate plants should be submitted in writing to: Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2730 Loker Avenue West, Carlsbad, California 92008. Comments must be received by April 15, 2002. Requests for a public hearing must be received by close of business on March 29, 2002.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

-FWS-