

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office
6010 Hidden Valley Road
Carlsbad, California 92009
Phone: 760-431-9440
Fax: 760-431-9624

News Release



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Contact: Jane Hendron, Douglas Krofta, or Dan Brown (Carlsbad, California) - 760/431-9440

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CRITICAL HABITAT DESIGNATED FOR FIVE CARBONATE PLANTS FROM THE SAN BERNARDINO MOUNTAINS

Mining Operations Expected to Continue

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published today a final rule designating critical habitat for five federally listed plants on approximately 13,180 acres of land in the San Bernardino Mountains. The designation will take effect on January 23, 2003.

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*).

Restricted primarily to soils derived from limestone, dolomite, or other substrates rich in calcium carbonate, the plants are found in scattered occurrences along a 35-mile stretch of the San Bernardino Mountains known as the carbonate belt.

To determine what areas are essential for the conservation of each of the carbonate plants, the Service identified known occurrences of each plant, and the specific soil and vegetation characteristics that provide for their respective life cycle needs (i.e., space for population growth, seed dispersal, germination, or pollination). All of the areas designated as critical habitat are considered occupied because they support standing plants or seed banks, and contain at least one of the primary constituent habitat elements that provide for the biological needs of the carbonate plants.

The Service is working with the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), mining interests, and the California Native Plant Society 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 identifies actions needed to conserve and recover the carbonate plants.

“We used the best available scientific information to determine areas essential to the conservation of the carbonate plants,” said Steve Thompson, Manager of the Service’s California-Nevada Operations Office. “The designation identifies areas that should be focused on in the context of

implementing recovery efforts and developing the Carbonate Habitat Management Strategy.”

Three separate units of critical habitat are being designated, as follows:

Unit 1 (Northeastern Slope): This unit encompasses approximately 11,980 acres extending from the western edge of White Mountain to the eastern edge of Rattlesnake Canyon. This unit supports populations of Cushenbury milk-vetch, Cushenbury buckwheat, Cushenbury oxytheca, and Parish’s daisy.

Unit 2 (Bertha Ridge): Located on the north side of Big Bear Lake, this unit includes about 685 acres. Populations of Cushenbury buckwheat and San Bernardino Mountains bladderpod are contained in this unit.

Unit 3 (Sugarlump Ridge): Covering only about 515 acres, lands in this unit are managed by the San Bernardino National Forest. The San Bernardino Mountains bladderpod is the only carbonate plant found in this unit.

Active mining for Portland cement and ground calcium carbonate (GCC) occurs on portions of land within each of the designated critical habitat units. These minerals are used in a variety of products including roofing materials, cement, paints, plastics, and food additives.

Most of the land designated as critical habitat is federally managed by the San Bernardino National Forest, or the BLM. About 1900 acres of private land has been designated as critical habitat.

Private landowners will not be affected by the critical habitat designation unless they are undertaking an activity that requires Federal funds, permits, or authorization. If a project on private land does have a Federal nexus, and the project may affect the carbonate plants or designated critical habitat, then the Federal agency responsible for issuing the funds or permits would have to consult with the Service.

As part of the process of designating critical habitat, the Service also analyzed the economic impacts associated with identifying these particular areas as critical habitat.

The purpose of the economic analysis is to provide a meaningful measure of the impacts that could result from designating particular areas as critical habitat. If the benefits of excluding an area from critical habitat are greater than the benefits of including it as critical habitat, the Service may exclude the area from designation unless such exclusion would result in extinction of a species.

A draft economic analysis determined that economic impacts associated with the proposed designation of critical habitat could range from a total of \$174 million to \$281 million over the next 60 years.

Based on a review of all comments and information received on the draft economic analysis and proposed designation of critical habitat, an addendum to the economic analysis estimates impacts could range from a total of \$220 million to \$356 million over the next 60 years.

Designation of critical habitat for the carbonate plants will not preclude all mining operations in the San Bernardino Mountains. Areas of active mining were excluded from critical habitat because those areas do not contain one or more of the primary constituent elements necessary for the biological needs of the plants. Additionally, some future mining operations will likely occur based on the outcome of future consultations with the Service.

The final rule designating critical habitat for the carbonate plants was published in today's *Federal Register*. Copies of the rule and other information about the plants can be downloaded from the Service's website at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov>. Supporting materials used in the development of this final rule are available for public inspection, during normal business hours at the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, California 92009. You may contact the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office at 760/431-9440 to schedule an appointment to view the supporting materials.

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 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 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.