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News Release



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CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA VERNAL POOL PLANT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed a critical habitat designation on 4,301 acres of vernal pool habitat in Los Angeles and San Diego counties for the federally threatened *Navarretia fossalis* (spreading navarretia). The proposed rule was published in today's *Federal Register*.

"The Service has identified about 31,000 acres of land in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Diego counties as essential habitat for spreading navarretia," said Steve Thompson, Manager of the Service's California/Nevada Operations Office. "However, we determined it was appropriate to exclude most of these lands from the proposed critical habitat because they're included in approved Habitat Conservation Plans or Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans, or because they occur on Department of Defense lands that are used for mission-critical training activities."

Almost all of the areas proposed as critical habitat for spreading navarretia are also identified as essential habitat for other vernal pool species, including the federally endangered San Diego fairy shrimp and Riverside fairy shrimp.

The Service has identified five discrete critical habitat units, four in San Diego County and one in Los Angeles County. A total of 4,301 acres of land is included as proposed critical habitat. All of the lands that contain essential habitat for spreading navarretia in Unit 3 are covered by Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar's Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan, or are covered by the San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program. Although the Service has not included any lands in Unit 3 in this critical habitat proposal, it is seeking public review and comment on these exclusions.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

This critical habitat proposal was completed in response to a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and other plaintiffs.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife management areas. Critical habitat identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations or protection.

Spreading navarretia, a member of the phlox family, is primarily associated with vernal pools, alkali grasslands, alkali playas and alkali sinks. The areas proposed as critical habitat are identified in five geographically separate units. Each unit includes lands occupied by the plant and surrounding watersheds that provide the necessary hydrological processes to sustain the vernal pools where the plants occur.

Public comments on the proposal will be accepted until December 6, 2004. Comments can be submitted in writing to the Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, California 92009. Comments may also be faxed to 760-431-9618, or sent by e-mail to fw1cfwo_nafo@fws.gov

Information and materials on today's proposal are available from the address above, and at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov/>.

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 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 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 and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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