U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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News Release

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SERVICE PROPOSES CRITICAL HABITAT FOR ENDANGERED QUINO CHECKERSPOT BUTTERFLY

DRAFT RECOVERY PLAN AVAILABLE FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

Responding to a court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced a proposal to designate critical habitat on approximately 301,010 acres of land in Riverside and San Diego counties, California, for the endangered Quino checkerspot butterfly (*Euphydryas editha quino*).

Critical habitat identifies geographic areas that are essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations or protections. However, a designation does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other special conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands and does not close areas to all access or use. Rather, its impact is that Federal agencies must consult with the Service on activities they undertake, fund, or permit that may affect critical habitat.

Four critical habitat units are being proposed for the Quino checkerspot butterfly. Lands within the boundaries of each proposed critical habitat unit contains known populations of the butterfly and supports one or more habitat elements considered essential to the life cycle needs of the species, such as host plants and nectar sites.

"Careful conservation planning will be the key to long-term recovery of this native California butterfly," said Mike Spear, Manager of the Service's California/Nevada Operations Office. "This species continues to decline everywhere it is found."

The Quino checkerspot was historically known to occur from Point Dume in Los Angeles County south to Valle de la Trinidad in northwestern Baja California, Mexico, and was possibly one of the most abundant native butterflies in southern California. Over the past century, populations of this species were reduced by more than 95 percent, primarily due to habitat loss and fragmentation, the introduction of non-native plants, and disruption of natural fire regimes. The Service listed the butterfly as an endangered species in 1997.

The four units proposed as critical habitat for the butterfly include:

- **Lake Mathews Unit** - covers approximately 32,000 acres in northwestern Riverside County in the Gavilan Hills southeast of Lake Mathews.

- **Southwest Riverside Unit** - the northern boundary of this unit is near the town of Hemet, and extends eastward from the cities of Temecula and Murrieta almost to the desert, and south into the Oak Grove Valley in San Diego County. This unit encompasses about 173,500 acres, of which 48,000 acres are managed by the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service.

- **Otay Unit** - approximately 72,400 acres are included in this unit which lies in the southern portion of San Diego County. Lands within this unit include portions of the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex, and lands around Otay Lake.

- **Jacumba Unit** - includes approximately 23,000 acres in southeastern San Diego County, including lands near Table Mountain that lie within the BLM's Jacumba National Cooperative Land and Wildlife Management Area.

A portion of the Tribal Trust lands of the Cahuilla Band of Mission Indians is being proposed for critical habitat designation because known populations of the Quino checkerspot occur immediately adjacent to these lands and suitable habitat exists to support the species.

The proposed critical habitat designation does not include lands within the boundaries of approved and implemented habitat conservation plans (HCP) where the Quino checkerspot butterfly is a covered species and for which an incidental take permit has been authorized. This exclusion applies to the Assessment District 161 Sub-regional HCP and the Rancho Bella Vista HCP, both in Riverside County, because the HCPs are designed to ensure the long-term survival of the Quino checkerspot.

Critical habitat is being proposed on lands within the San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) because the Quino checkerspot is not a covered species under the MSCP or any of its subarea plans. However, most of the lands within the MSCP boundaries that are being proposed as critical habitat fall within designated preserve areas for the MSCP. Currently, the County of San Diego and San Diego Gas and Electric, which have completed and implemented subarea plans within the MSCP, are developing amendments to their permits to gain coverage for the butterfly.

The proposed designation of the critical habitat for the butterfly should not impede ongoing efforts to develop and implement new HCPs in southern California, including the Western Riverside County Multiple Species HCP and the North San Diego County Subarea of the MSCP.

When mapping each of the proposed critical habitat units, the Service attempted to exclude features and structures such as roads, buildings and agricultural fields because these areas no longer support habitat elements for the butterfly. However, the minimum mapping value used to delineate the proposed units is not refined enough to allow us to exclude all such developed areas from the boundaries of the proposed units. Although these roads, buildings, parking lots, rail lines and other features are within the mapped boundaries, they are not being designated as critical habitat. Activities within the proposed critical habitat units that are limited to

already developed areas would not require consultation with the Service, unless the actions might affect the species and/or primary constituent elements in adjacent critical habitat.

The Quino checkerspot butterfly, distinctive because of its checkered pattern of dark brown, reddish, and yellowish spots, is generally seen flying in March and April. Adult butterflies have a wingspan of only 1.5 inches and spend most of their time searching for mates, warming themselves in the sun, feeding on nectar, defending territories, and in the case of females, searching for places to lay their eggs. Even though the adult Quino checkerspot butterfly will live for only 10-14 days, it takes eight months or more to develop from the larval stage.

At the time the Quino checkerspot was listed under the Endangered Species Act, the Service concluded that designation of critical habitat was not prudent because such designation could lead to intentional acts of habitat vandalism and increased threat from people seeking to obtain specimens of the butterfly for collecting and trading. In 1999, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a 60-day notice of intent to sue for failure to designate critical habitat for the butterfly. The Department of Interior entered into a settlement agreement with the Center that required the Service to review its previous decision and, if critical habitat was found to be prudent, to submit a proposal on or before February 1, 2001.

A draft recovery plan for the Quino checkerspot butterfly has been prepared by the Service, in consultation with the Quino Checkerspot Butterfly Recovery Team. The Service established the Recovery Team, a group of biologists with expertise on the butterfly and conservation biology, to ensure that the draft recovery plan incorporates the best available scientific information on the species. The draft recovery plan provides the scientific basis for the identification of areas important to the conservation of the species.

The objective of the draft recovery plan is to provide a framework, or blueprint, for the long-term recovery of the species so that it can be downlisted from endangered to threatened. Criteria outlined in the draft plan that could lead to the downlisting of the butterfly include permanent protection of habitat supporting known populations; design and implementation of habitat management strategies to restore host plant populations, nectar sources and pollinators; control of non-native plants; and successful introduction of two additional Quino checkerspot butterfly populations in the remaining undeveloped coastal areas within its historic range.

To ensure a complete and comprehensive review of the proposal to designate critical habitat for the Quino checkerspot, any additional information and data about the species or the economic or other impacts of the designation should be submitted in writing to Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2730 Loker Avenue West, Carlsbad, California 92008.

Comments may also be sent by electronic mail to fw1cfwo_qcb@fws.gov. Please submit comments in ASCII file format and avoid the use of special characters and encryption. Please include “Attn: RIN 1018-AH03,” your name and return address in the e-mail message. If you do not receive a confirmation from the system that your e-mail message was received, contact the Service directly by calling the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office at 760-431-9440.

Comments and materials received by 5:00 p.m. on April 9, 2001 will be considered in the final designation of critical habitat. Requests for a public hearing must be received by March 26, 2001. Comments

and materials received, as well as supporting documentation used in the preparation of this proposed rule, will be available for public inspection, by appointment, during normal business hours at the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office.

A Notice of Availability for the Draft Recovery Plan for the Quino Checkerspot Butterfly will be published in the Federal Register on February 8, 2001. Requests for copies of the draft recovery plan should be directed to the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office. Comments on the draft recovery plan received by 5:00pm on March 26, 2001 will be considered in preparing the final recovery plan.

Copies of the proposed rule, the draft recovery plan, and other information about the Quino checkerspot butterfly can be downloaded from the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office's website 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 93-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 530 refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fish and wildlife management assistance 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 wildlife agencies.