

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
2493 Portola Road, Suite B
Ventura, California 93003
Phone: 805/644-1766
Fax: 805/644-3958

<http://ventura.fws.gov>

News Release



June 4, 2004

04-058

Contact: Lois Grunwald, 805/644-1766

CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR INYO/MONO COUNTY PLANT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed to designate 8,490 acres of critical habitat for Fish Slough milk-vetch – a plant found exclusively in a desert wetland oasis in southeastern California. The areas under consideration are located in Inyo and Mono counties. The proposal was published in today's *Federal Register*.

Federal land accounts for 5,401 acres under consideration for critical habitat, while the city of Los Angeles owns 2,923 acres. The remaining 166 acres are located on State-owned lands.

Fish Slough milk-vetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *piscinensis*) gets its name from a rare ecosystem in a desert area north of Bishop called Fish Slough. The slough – which the Bureau of Land Management classifies as an “Area of Critical Environmental Concern” – is a place where geographic isolation, geology, climate, and hydrology have created a home for one of the richest wetland floras in the Great Basin. Fish Slough encompasses wetlands, alkali meadows and uplands. In addition to the Fish Slough milk-vetch, Fish Slough also provides habitat for several rare plants and animals, including the Federally protected Owens pupfish, and a plant species called King's ivesia.

Fish Slough milk-vetch, a member of the pea family, is a perennial with lavender flowers. Threats faced by the plant include: habitat destruction because of off-road vehicle use; cattle grazing; grazing by native animals; competition with non-native plant species; changes in its preferred wetland habitat; and ground water pumping or water diversions that alter the hydrology of Fish Slough.

Native plants are important for their ecological, economic, and aesthetic values. Plants 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 to treat cancer, heart disease, juvenile leukemia, and malaria, and to assist in organ transplants. Plants are also used to develop natural pesticides.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. 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.

In 30 years of implementing the 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 exists on many national wildlife refuges managed by the Service and state wildlife management areas.

Fish Slough milk-vetch was listed as a threatened species in 1998. This critical habitat proposal was completed in response to a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and the California Native Plant Society. Today's announcement is in compliance with a September 2003 court ruling requiring the Service to propose critical habitat for the milk-vetch by June 1, 2004. Copies of the rule and other materials can be downloaded from: <http://ventura.fws.gov> . Comments on the proposal may be submitted in writing to: Field Supervisor, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office; 2493 Portola Road, Suite B; Ventura, Calif. 93003, or may be submitted electronically to: fw1fsmv_pch@r1.fws.gov. They may also be faxed to: 805/644-3958. Comments will be accepted until August 3, 2004. Requests for a public hearing must be submitted no later than July 19, 2004.

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 nearly 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 fishery resource 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 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.