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News Release



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CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR ENDANGERED PLANT IN RIVERSIDE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed designating about 227 acres of land within the Cleveland National Forest as critical habitat for the endangered Munz's onion (*Allium munzii*).

In preparing the proposed rule, the Service reviewed available scientific and commercial information about the plant, its habitat requirements, and the Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) that protect Munz's onion populations.

Lands within the boundaries of three completed HCPs – Rancho Bella Vista, North Peak Development Project, and Lake Mathews – are being excluded from proposed critical habitat because these HCPs provide for the conservation of the species.

Land within the boundaries of a fourth HCP, which is still being developed, was also excluded from the proposed designation.

“Essential habitat within the boundaries of the draft Western Riverside Multiple Species HCP is not being proposed as critical habitat.” said Steve Thompson, Manager of the Service's California/Nevada Operations Office. “Significant progress has been made on this draft plan and we expect the plan, when finalized, will provide adequate conservation for Munz's onion.”

If the draft Western Riverside plan is not finalized, then areas identified as essential to the conservation of the species that occur within the draft plan's boundaries may be included in the final designation.

Although the areas within the Cleveland National Forest that are being proposed as critical habitat also would be within the broad planning boundaries of the draft Western Riverside plan, activities on those lands will not be specifically covered under the Western Riverside plan permit.

Munz's onion is a member of the lily family and is found only in mesic clay soils in western Riverside County, California. Sixteen populations of this species are known to still exist, and most contain fewer than 1,000 individual plants. The five largest populations contain between 2,000 and 50,000 individuals.

Munz's onion was listed as endangered in October 1998. Threats included habitat loss resulting from urbanization, agriculture, and clay mining. Critical habitat was not designated at the time the plant was listed because the Service determined that the designation would not benefit the species.

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 or protection. 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.

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.

This critical habitat proposal was completed in response to lawsuits filed by the California Native Plant Society, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Building Industry Legal Defense Foundation.

Public comment on the proposed rule will be accepted until August 3, 2004. Requests for a public hearing will be accepted until July 19, 2004. A copy of the proposed rule and other information about Munz's onion can be obtained by calling the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office at 760-431-9440.

Comments and information regarding the proposed rule to designate critical habitat for Munz's onion 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 fwlcfwoalmu@fws.gov

Information and materials on today's proposal are available from the address above. The proposal appeared in the June 4, 2004 issue of the *Federal Register*.

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, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management 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 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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