



News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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Comments Sought on Proposed Conservation Agreement to Protect Ko'ko' on Cocos Island

A draft Safe Harbor Agreement that proposes to establish a breeding population of the endangered ko'ko' or Guam rail on Cocos Island is available for a 30-day public comment period, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The draft agreement and proposed permit was published in the *Federal Register* on January 10.

Cocos Island Resort and the Guam Department of Agriculture have applied for an enhancement of survival permit and a proposed Safe Harbor Agreement for the benefit of the ko'ko'. Implementation of the proposed agreement would provide for voluntary habitat restoration, maintenance, and activities to enhance the habitat and recovery of the Guam rail on 83.1 acres of Cocos Island partly owned by Cocos Island Resort, and the Guam Department of Parks and Recreation.

“Thanks to the Cocos Island Resort and its cooperators in local and federal governments, wild ko'ko' may once again be seen on Guam,” said Patrick Leonard, field supervisor, Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office. “Voluntary cooperative conservation efforts with the private sector strengthen the efforts of government agencies and help ensure protection of valuable habitat and the recovery of endangered species.”

A Safe Harbor Agreement encourages private landowners to conduct voluntary conservation activities and assures them that they will not be subjected to increased endangered species restrictions should their beneficial stewardship efforts result in increased numbers of listed species. As long as enrolled landowners maintain agreed-upon baseline conditions, they may make any other lawful use of the enrolled property during the permit term. The primary objective of this proposed agreement is to establish a breeding population of Guam rails on Cocos Island within 10 years.

The private lands covered by the proposed agreement and permit consist of mixed forest and beach strand habitat. Current land use practices include the operation of a day resort for tourists and overnight camping. The ko'ko' was last observed in the wild on Northern Guam in the mid-1980s; therefore, the baseline for the species is zero.

Management activities by the applicants and other cooperators to encourage the establishment and survival of ko'ko' during the term of the proposed agreement and permit include:

- eradicating rats and mice and control of the monitor lizard population prior to release of Guam rail;
- reducing the likelihood of reintroduction of rats, mice, and the introduction of the brown treesnake;
- developing and implementing a forest enhancement plan to reduce invasive plant species and increase native plant species;
- releasing Guam rails and monitoring survivorship, breeding behavior, habitat preference, and nesting success; and
- creating educational materials to promote the understanding and appreciation of wildlife recovery and invasive species issues for Cocos Island staff and visitors.

The ko'ko' is a flightless, medium-sized rail, endemic to the island of Guam and is considered one of the most critically endangered rails in the world. The head and back are brown with a grey eye stripe and throat. The breast is dark black with white barring, and the legs and beak are dark brown. Males are significantly larger than females. It is an omnivorous feeder but appears to prefer animal over vegetable food. It is known to eat gastropods, skinks, geckos, insects, and carrion as well as seeds and palm leaves.

The last remaining wild ko'ko' were collected from the forest on Andersen Air Force Base in 1985. One captive population is located in Mangilao, Guam, and others are spread throughout 17 participating zoos on the mainland U.S. The ko'ko' was federally listed as endangered in 1984.

Previous efforts to establish ko'ko' in snake-reduced areas on Guam have been thwarted by feral cat predation and feral ungulates. Cocos Island provides a cat and ungulate-free environment where brown treesnake control can be facilitated through rodent eradication and the implementation of biosecurity and response protocols. The establishment of wild populations of captive-bred species, such as the ko'ko', will help to avoid problems such as inbreeding and behavioral changes from lengthy confinement. In addition, the establishment of several wild subpopulations can buffer a species from localized random events such as cat predation, fire, diseases, and typhoons. Free-ranging ko'ko' on Cocos Island will also create an opportunity to study rail behavior, survival, habitat preference and nesting success, as well as provide a public venue for outreach activities regarding conservation of ko'ko' and invasive species control.

This project will also develop regional expertise in rodent eradication, detection and control of low-density snake populations, biosecurity measures necessary to maintain quarantine, and methods to exclude nontarget species from toxic bait stations. In addition, Cocos Island will provide a model environment to develop strategies for future reintroductions of ko'ko' and other native bird habitat restoration efforts on Guam, other Pacific Islands and offshore islets.

The Service has made a preliminary determination that the proposed Safe Harbor Agreement and permit application are eligible for categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act. The basis for this determination is contained in an Environmental Action Statement which also is available for public review.

Copies of the draft Safe Harbor Agreement and draft Environmental Action Statement may be downloaded from the Service's website at <http://pacificislands.fws.gov>. Copies are also available by calling the Fish and Wildlife Service office in Honolulu at 808-792 9400, or Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources, Guam Department of Agriculture in Guam at 671-735-3955/56.

All comments from interested parties must be received on or before February 11, 2008. Please address written comments to Patrick Leonard, Field Supervisor, Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office, 300 Ala Moana Boulevard, Room #3-122, Honolulu, HI 96850. You may also send comments by facsimile at (808) 792-9580.

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 97-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 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.