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CRITICAL HABITAT IDENTIFIED FOR THREATENED TEXAS MINNOW

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated 16.5 miles of streams in Val Verde and Kinney counties as critical habitat for the Devils River minnow. Five and a half miles of San Felipe Creek, including the outflow of East and West springs, and 11 miles of Pinto Creek make up the critical habitat designation. The fish is protected as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The Devils River minnow spends its entire life in spring-fed streams. It requires nursery areas for raising young, general space for population growth, plant material for food and places in which to seek shelter. A critical habitat designation identifies geographic areas that contain the specific habitat elements essential for the conservation of the species. The designation has no influence on private land unless the work being accomplished is federally permitted or funded.

The Service identified segments in five creeks considered important to the recovery of the minnow.

It then analyzed whether the conservation benefit for the Devils River minnow was greater if the segment was included or excluded. Devils River, Sycamore Creek and Las Moras Creek were dropped from the final critical habitat rule because excluding them allows for more productive partnerships with private landowners and a greater variety of conservation tools to be employed. San Felipe Creek and Pinto Creek segments remain in the designation.

“Our primary purpose is to conserve species and we can do this best by maintaining and promoting opportunities for non-federal partnerships,” said Benjamin N. Tuggle, PhD, Regional Director for the Service’s Southwest Region. “Working with local officials and landowners is a key component for conservation of the minnow.”

Much of the fish’s habitat occurs in streams that flow through private lands. Since being listed as threatened in 1999, the Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the City of Del Rio,

private landowners and others have worked cooperatively to implement voluntary conservation measures and to develop strategies that will benefit the minnow and its habitat. These cooperative efforts can continue in all river areas, including those designated as critical habitat.

“We have a variety of tools available to us to promote voluntary cooperation for conservation projects. Incentive-based programs, such as our Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program or Safe Harbor Agreements, have been used successfully to conserve other listed species in Texas,” said Tuggle.

The Devils River minnow is usually less than three inches long with hatched markings along the sides and a lateral line that extends through the upper lip. The species only lives in the spring-fed streams of the western Edwards Plateau that flow into the Rio Grande in Texas. The fish inhabits shallow areas with moderate to swift currents. They use the stream’s gravel bottoms to deposit their eggs for spawning. The small fish are most often found amongst aquatic vegetation – presumably for cover to avoid predators. The primary threats to the species include habitat loss and degradation (both in terms of water quantity and quality) and impacts from non-native species.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species, and which may require special management considerations or protection. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat. 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 or limit public access to public or private lands and waters.

This final rule was prepared pursuant to a court order resulting from a lawsuit filed in 2005 against the Service by Forest Guardians (now WildEarth Guardians), the Center for Biological Diversity and Save Our Springs Alliance.

The final rule is available on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/Library> or contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Austin Ecological Services Field Office, 10711 Burnet Road, Suite 200, Austin, Texas 78758 or via fax at 512-490-0974 to request a copy.

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