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### **Environmental and Economic Effects of Proposing Critical Habitat in Coastal Counties for Migratory Piping Plovers Analyzed**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the availability of two draft documents associated with its proposal to re-designate critical habitat for the wintering population of a rare bird, the piping plover, in nine counties along the Texas coast. Comments on a draft economic analysis and an environmental analysis, as well as the critical habitat proposal, will be accepted through Jan. 8, 2009.

When specifying an area as critical habitat, the Endangered Species Act requires the Service to consider economics, the impact to national security, and other relevant impacts of the designation. If the benefits of excluding an area outweigh the benefits of designating it, the Secretary may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless the exclusions would result in the extinction of a threatened or endangered species.

An economic analysis estimates costs related to the conservation of the piping plover and its proposed critical habitat. An environmental analysis determines if a federal action is likely to have significant impacts on the human environment.

Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that contain elements essential for the conservation of a protected species. The areas may require special management considerations

and protection. Approximately 150,000 acres in Cameron, Willacy, Kenedy, Kleberg, Nueces, Aransas, Calhoun, Matagorda and Brazoria counties may meet that description for the piping plover.

The wintering piping plover is protected as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. It is a shorebird that uses intertidal beaches and flats and associated dune systems and flats above annual high tide in coastal areas. The intertidal areas offer foraging and roosting sites. Areas above high tide provide refuge from high winds and cold weather.

The Service had designated critical habitat for piping plovers from North Carolina to Texas in 2001. In 2006, the Texas General Land Office challenged 19 of the 37 wintering piping plover critical habitat units in Texas. Under a settlement order, the Service is to re-look at the designation for the 19 units.

To review the documents, go to [www.fws.gov/southwest/es/Library/](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/Library/) or request a copy from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Corpus Christi Ecological Services Office, 6300 Ocean Drive, TAMU-CC Unit 5837, Corpus Christi, Texas 78412-5837, telephone (361) 994-9005.

Written comments should be submitted to Public Comments Processing; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203. Comments may also be sent electronically using the Federal eRulemaking Portal at: <http://www.regulations.gov>.

The piping plover is a small, pale-colored North American shorebird named for its melodic mating call. The species breeds in three discrete areas of North America – the Northern Great Plains, the Great Lakes, and the Atlantic Coast. Plovers from all three breeding populations winter in coastal areas of the United States from North Carolina to Texas, and along the coast of eastern Mexico and on some Caribbean islands.

Piping plovers begin arriving on the wintering grounds in Texas as early as July with some late-nesting birds arriving in September. A few can be found on the wintering grounds throughout the year, but sightings are rare in late May, June, and early July. While their migration is poorly understood, a recent study suggests that plovers use inland and coastal stopover sites when migrating from breeding areas to wintering grounds. In late February, piping plovers begin leaving the wintering grounds to migrate north to breeding sites. Northward migration peaks in late March, and by late May most birds have left the wintering grounds.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov).

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