



The Endangered Species Act and Candidate Species

What is a candidate species?

Candidate species are plants and animals for which the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has sufficient information on their biological status and threats to propose them as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but for which development of a proposed listing regulation is precluded by other higher priority listing activities. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), which has jurisdiction over most marine species, defines candidate species more broadly to include species whose status is of concern but more information is needed before they can be proposed for listing.

What protection does the ESA provide to candidate species?

Candidate species receive no statutory protection under the ESA. However, the Service encourages the formation of partnerships to conserve these species because they are by definition species that may warrant future protection under the ESA.

How do species become candidates?

Identification of potential candidates is a cooperative effort. The Service's Endangered Species specialists work closely with staff from other Service resource programs, such as fisheries, refuges, and migratory birds, as well as representatives of other Federal and State natural resource agencies, local and Tribal governments, business and industry, academia, conservation organizations, and other private interests to identify potential candidate species. The Nature Conservancy's Natural Heritage Central Databases system, which ranks species' status at State, National, and global levels based on their relative imperilment, also is an important tool for identifying potential candidate species. This database will soon be available via a public internet delivery tool (NatureServe®), and will provide

information on more than 50,000 plants, animals, and ecological communities of the U. S. and Canada.

When sufficient information is developed to make well documented, biologically sound determinations about a species' status, the Service's Field Offices consider whether it meets the criteria for listing under the ESA. The Service's Regional Offices then provide recommendations for additions to the candidate list to the Service's Director, whose concurrence is necessary before a species becomes an official candidate species. Species are assigned a listing priority from 1 to 12 based on the magnitude of threats they face, the immediacy of the threats, and taxonomic uniqueness (for example, full species have higher priority than subspecies). The species' listing priority dictates the relative order in which proposed listing rules are prepared, with the species at greatest risk (listing priority 1 through 3) being proposed first.

What is the advantage of conserving species that are already candidates or proposed for listing?

An effective program for the conservation of endangered species requires a means of addressing species that have not yet been listed but that face immediate, identifiable risks. Early conservation preserves management options, minimizes the cost of recovery, and reduces the potential for restrictive land use policies in the future. Addressing the needs of species before the regulatory restrictions associated with listed species come into play often allows greater management flexibility to stabilize or restore these species and their habitats. In addition, as threats are reduced and populations are increased or stabilized, priority for listing can be shifted to those species in greatest need of the ESA's protective measures. Ideally, sufficient threats can be removed to eliminate the need for listing.



Gooddings onion, a candidate species
Photo by Reggie Fletcher/U.S. Forest Service