

Department of the Interior  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office  
Hidden Valley Road  
Carlsbad, California 92009  
Phone: 760/431-9440  
Fax: 760/431-9624

# News Release



(SC)

04-078

Contact: Jane Hendron, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office – 760/431-9440 ext. 205

For Release: August 4, 2004

## **CRITICAL SAND DUNE HABITAT DESIGNATED FOR PEIRSON'S MILK-VETCH**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a final rule today identifying 21,863 acres of land in the Algodones Dunes as critical habitat for Peirson's milk-vetch (*Astragalus magdalenae* var. *peirsonii*). A final economic analysis of costs associated with conservation activities for the plant is also available on the Internet at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov>.

The economic analysis estimates the regional economies of Imperial and Yuma counties would see an upper bound reduction in output of \$2.8 million in the year 2013 if the areas designated as critical habitat were closed to off-highway vehicle use.

Most of the Algodones Dunes is managed by the Bureau of Land Management as part of the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, and is heavily used by off-highway vehicle enthusiasts.

"The Service is continuing to work cooperatively with the BLM on implementation of their Recreation Area Management Plan," said Steve Thompson, Manager of the Service's California/Nevada Operations Office. "Once our consultation is completed we anticipate the BLM will move forward with finalization of their management plan for the dunes."

Other impacts identified in the final analysis include an estimated \$24.5 million in costs associated with conservation activities for the plant between 1998 – the year the plant was listed under the ESA – and 2004, and a projected \$11.4 million in future consultation costs for the BLM and the Service from 2005 to 2024.

Peirson's milk-vetch, a perennial member of the legume family, has delicate purple flowers. Well adapted to the harsh desert environment, the plant has a long tap root that penetrates deep into the sand to reach moisture and functions as an anchor in shifting sands. The plant produces large fruits each containing 11 to 16 flattened black seeds. Plants may flower in their first year

and produce between one and five fruits, but older plants produce significantly more fruits – approximately 171 fruits per plant.

All of the areas designated as critical habitat contain intact, active sand dune systems; substrates of Rositas fine sands of sufficient depth to promote Peirson's milk-vetch and discourage the growth of creosote bush; wind-formed slopes of less than 30 degrees, but generally less than 20 degrees; and compatible sand-associated plants that support the white-faced dagger bee, the primary pollinator of Peirson's milk-vetch.

Critical habitat is a term in the Act that identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. 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 Service and state wildlife management areas.

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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