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## Habitat for two threatened plants will be protected in Southern Oregon

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By Abby Haight

Two endangered plants that depend on vernal pools for survival should be protected on 11,038 acres of critical habitat in Jackson and Josephine counties, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed today.

Cook's lomatium and the large-flowered woolly meadowfoam were federally listed as endangered in 2002, but the government failed to designate critical habitat for them as required by the Endangered Species Act.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife proposal was prompted by a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Critical habitat is one of the most important safety nets for species listed under the Endangered Species Act," Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the center, said in a statement. "These plants, along with all the species dependent on vernal pools, will benefit greatly from the added protections afforded by critical habitat designation."

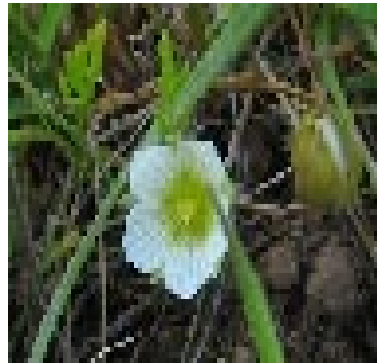
"Species with critical habitat are more than twice as likely to be recovering as those without it."

The threatened vernal pool fairy shrimp also depends on the "flood and drought" conditions of ephemeral pools, created when winter rains are trapped by thin topsoil atop volcanic bedrock.

Since the 1980s, Cook's lomatium -- also known as Cook's desert parsley -- has lost more than 50 percent of its habitat to development. The plant is found only in the Agate Desert near Medford and French Flat in the Illinois Valley of Josephine County.

The large-flowered woolly meadowfoam is found only in the Agate Desert.

But development in the Rogue River Valley has eaten into the desert, leaving less than a quarter of its original size intact. The pools are further threatened by road and power line construction, competition from weeds and roadside spraying. In Josephine County, threats also include gold mining, logging and uncontrolled off-road vehicle use.



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

The large-flowered woolly meadowfoam grows only in the Agate Desert near Medford, where ephemeral pools are formed by winter rains.



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Cook's lomatium is found only in vernal pools in the Agate Desert and Illinois Valley.

The Nature Conservancy manages the 53-acre Agate Desert Preserve and the 145-acre Whetstone Savanna in the desert, and the Oregon Department of Transportation owns an 80-acre conservation bank next to the Whetstone Savanna. The three preserves have some of the last remaining vernal pools in the valley.

The proposed critical habitat designation would not create a preserve or conservation area, nor would it restrict uses on private land. But federal agencies would be required to get U.S. Fish and Wildlife approval for projects that might harm or destroy that habitat.

The 11,038 acres are in 25 units, with about 8,058 acres privately owned. Of the total, 6,327 acres will protect the large-flowered woolly meadowfoam and 7,104 acres will protect the Cook's lomatium in Jackson and Josephine counties. The plants' habitats overlap on 2,393 acres.

A large section \_ 5,200 acres \_ was designated critical habitat for vernal pool fairy shrimp in 2003.

--Abby Haight; [abbyhaight@news.oregonian.com](mailto:abbyhaight@news.oregonian.com)