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Threatened plant gets habitat designation

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Federal officials have designated 51 miles of streambanks in two southeast Wyoming counties as "critical habitat" for a short-lived perennial herb that is protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The move will not result in the closure of the area to all access or use, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says.

The agency announced Tuesday it has designated 3,538 acres of critical habitat along 51 stream miles within Platte and Laramie counties for the threatened Colorado butterfly plant.

Federal officials said the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection for the plant. The action merely identifies the geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of the plant and that may require special management considerations later.

But conservationists lauded the move Tuesday and said Endangered Species Act records show that wildlife, fish and plants with protected critical habitat are twice as likely to recover than species without the designation.

"Designating critical habitat puts the Colorado butterfly plant on the road to recovery, ultimately benefiting both this rare plant, its

fragile streamside habitat and communities that depend on a healthy and sustainable environment," said Jeremy Nichols with the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.

The designated acreage in Wyoming is located along sections of Tepee Ring Creek, Bear Creek and Little Bear Creek, Horse Creek, Lodgepole Creek, Diamond Creek and Lone Tree Creek. The Fish and Wildlife Service excluded 4,948 acres from the 8,486 acres that were proposed as critical habitat, saying it designated only those areas that have the biological features essential to the conservation of the Colorado butterfly plant.

The agency said the designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation areas. It also does not allow government or public access to private lands.

In Wyoming, most populations of the plant -- about 90 percent -- are found on private property. The other 10 percent are on state lands.

Key step

Nichols said the designation is a key part of a three-part process of protecting and recovering species under the Endangered Species Act. The first step is listing the species,

the second step is the critical habitat designation, and the third is the development of a species recovery plan.

Critical habitat for the Colorado butterfly plant was not proposed at the time the herb was listed in 2000 due to budget constraints and other listing actions of higher priority, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Consequently, a lawsuit was filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Biological Legal Foundation for failure to designate critical habitat. A court-approved settlement agreement required the agency to make a final critical designation for the plant by the end of 2004.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials said the final designation differs from what was proposed, including the exclusion of some areas in Wyoming because private landowners had developed conservation agreements that will provide conservation benefits for the plant.

The final designation said habitat located on F.E. Warren Air Force Base was not considered for designation as critical habitat because the base has approved an integrated natural resources management plan that addresses the conservation needs of the species.

Federal biologists say two populations of the Colorado butterfly plant exist on the base, and one of

them includes the second-largest known concentration of the plant. In 1990, a research natural area was established to include all the known, naturally occurring populations on the base.

About the Colorado butterfly plant

* What it is: A short-lived perennial herb.

* Where it's found: In moist areas of floodplains in Platte and Laramie counties in southeast Wyoming and Weld County, Colo. The plant depends on periodic disturbances, such as flooding, to provide a disturbed soil bed.

* Features: The plant stands 2-3 feet tall with one or a few reddish, fuzzy stems and white flowers that turn pink or red with age. Only a few flowers are open at one time.

* Threats to the plant: Non-selective use of herbicides, overgrazing, haying and mowing at certain times of the year, water development, land conversion for cultivation, competition from exotic plants, loss of habitat due to urban growth.

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service