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## Rare plant gets Critical Habitat

**Designation covers more than 8,000 acres in Fish Slough, but BLM says it won't change current management**

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The Fish Slough milk-vetch doesn't look like much when compared to other flowering, desert-dwelling plants.

But in the eyes of botanists and the federal government, the plant's purple flowers and green leaves occupy a unique and precious place in the plant world, and now the only place in the whole world where the plant grows has obtained an extra level of protection.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently designated 8,007 acres of "Critical Habitat" for the Fish Slough milk-vetch that encompasses the only place the plant grows. The Critical Habitat, and the plants' home, is located north of Bishop and north of the Owens River and straddles the Inyo and Mono county line, west of U.S. 6.

The designation will not change the current management of the federal lands within those boundaries, noted Bureau of Land Management Bishop Field Office Botanist Anne Halford. The BLM has managed the entire Fish Slough area as an "Area of Critical Concern." In addition, when the Fish Slough milk-vetch

was listed as "threatened" in 1998 under the Endangered Species Act, the BLM took additional steps to manage the area to reduce potential impacts to the plant, she noted.

The biggest impact of the Critical Habitat designation could be the BLM's ability to obtain grants and other, additional funding to carry out restoration efforts and other projects to help protect and expand the population of the rare plants, Halford said.

Surrounded by high desert, the Fish Slough has been described as "an oasis" for a variety of plants and animals.

The southern 8,000 acres of the Fish Slough, with its wetlands, alkali meadows and uplands, represents a rare ecosystem, "a place where geographic isolation, geology, climate and hydrology have created a home for one of the richest wetland floras in the Great Basin," according to a Fish and Wildlife press release.

In addition to the Fish Slough milk-vetch, Fish Slough also provides habitat for several other rare plants and animals, including the federally protected Owens pupfish, and a plant species called King's Ivessa.

Of the 8,007 acres proposed for the

Critical Habitat designation, 5,401 is federal land (BLM), 2,440 is owned by the City of Los Angeles and the remaining 166 acres are state-owned.

The first plan for creating the Critical Habitat, made in June 2004, proposed 8,490 acres for the designation. However, when the FWS made the final designation, in June 2005, it determined a 483-acre parcel in Inyo County did not meet the criteria for the Critical Habitat label.

The Fish Slough milk-vetch (*As-tragalus lentiginosus* var. *piscinensis*) is a unique sub-species and a member of the pea family. It is a perennial with lavender flowers.

The FWS said some of the threats faced by the plant that federal agencies work to minimize include habitat destruction because of off-road vehicle use, cattle grazing, wildlife grazing, competition from non-native plants, changes in existing wetland habitat and groundwater pumping or water diversions that change the hydrology of Fish Slough, or application or runoff of chemical or biological agents into the air, soil or non-native plants.

The biggest threats faced by the plant involve some human activity,

such as off-road vehicle use, and some plant activity, namely invasion of the area by noxious weeds.

Halford said the restoration and protection efforts have already begun. This year, the BLM has about 500 milk-vetch seedlings that it plans to plant in the Fish Slough area next spring or fall.

In addition, the BLM has applied to the state OHV Commission for funds to "redirect" a dirt road in the area away from a group of the threatened plants.

Having the FWS Critical Habitat designation in place "is a great thing, not just for the plant, but because it allows us to pursue more funding mechanisms" for projects and plans involving the Fish Slough milk-vetch, said Halford.

The designation will also provide "another layer of consultation" between the BLM and FWS when the BLM proposes any projects or changes in management that could affect the plant, she noted.

However, the Critical Habitat designation does not mandate changes or policies to protect the plant be implemented by private landowners, which in this case is the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

However, Halford said she and botanists at LADWP have been conferring and consulting about the Fish Slough area and the threatened milk-vetch "for years."

The Critical Habitat designation also does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other special conservation area, and does not change existing access, for the public or private landowners, in the area, the federal agencies noted.

The Critical Habitat designation should put an end to a long legal battle.

The FWS did not designate Critical Habitat after listing the milk-vetch as threatened in 1998, because it was determined the potential benefits of the designation did not outweigh the potential negative impacts.

In November 2002, the Center for Biological Diversity and the California Native Plant Society sued in an effort to reverse the FWS decision, and in July 2002, those groups prevailed in court.

As a result of that ruling, 8,007 acres of a desert "oasis" are now officially "critical" to the survival of the unique, Fish Slough milk-vetch.