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U.S. plan would protect milk-vetch plants in Utah

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ST. GEORGE — A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposal would set aside thousands of acres to protect two federally endangered plants in southwestern Utah.

The proposal would designate approximately 8,896 acres of critical habitat for the Shivwits milk-vetch and the Holmgren milk-vetch, two Western pea plants found only in Washington County and Mohave County, Ariz.

Most of the proposed critical habitat area is on state or federal public lands managed by the national Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Only 272 acres of privately owned land are involved in the proposal, according to Mitch King, service director of the Mountain-Prairie region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“The service is proposing only those areas considered essential to the conservation of the Holmgren and Shivwits milk-vetches,” said King. He urged those interested in the proposal to provide comments

by a May 30 deadline. Washington County officials said they are cautiously supportive of the proposal.

“We have already designated land to be set aside for critical habitat in those same areas of the county,” said Washington County Commissioner Jim Eardley, referring to a separate public-lands bill proposed this spring by Utah Sen. Bob Bennett and Rep. Jim Matheson.

The critical-habitat proposal is also being hastened by settlement of a lawsuit filed in 2004 against the Fish and Wildlife Service by the Utah Native Plant Society and the Center for Biological Diversity. The lawsuit argued that after the two milk-vetch plants were named to the endangered species list in 2001, the Fish and Wildlife Service should have set aside habitat for the rare plants as required by law. Habitat destruction is the primary threat to both plants, the plaintiffs argued in pursuing the lawsuit, and the federal agency was moving too slowly in protecting the wildflowers.

“These species are truly in peril,” said Renee Van Buren, a botanist with Utah Valley State College who

specializes in endangered species, in a news release about the settlement reached last year. “Critical habitat protection is essential to prevent their extinction and promote recovery.”

According to conservation groups, construction of a proposed interchange that would connect Interstate 15 with a new highway on the southeast side of St. George north to Hurricane would seriously compromise the plant’s future. Rapid population growth around the St. George area is also impacting the plants’ habitat because more roads, utility lines and other developments disturb the land, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Both of the federally endangered plants are also facing a five-year status review by the same agency to determine whether the protected listings are accurate and should be continued.

A copy of the critical habitat proposal for the milk-vetch plants is available on line at mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/plants or by contacting the FWS Utah field office at 801-975-3330.