



Onslow, Pender land could be declared critical habitat

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A total of 189 acres located in Onslow and Pender counties could soon be designated critical habitat for an endangered plant with roots in Eastern North Carolina.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is taking public comment on the proposed designation for the golden sedge, a plant listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The plant only grows in the outer coastal plain of North Carolina, in wet savannas or in very wet to saturated soils adjacent to or in shallow drainage ditches, the Fish and Wildlife Service said.

While listed as an endangered species in January 2002, a designation of critical habitat has never been done due to budget and workload constraints, the agency said.

“It’s part of the Endangered Species Act that we’re supposed to have critical habitat for all species,” said Patty Matteson, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Center for Biological Diversity challenged in court the service’s failure to do so for the golden sedge and three other species.

The critical habitat designation now being proposed is part of a settlement agreement, she said.

According to the information in the Federal Register, eight units totaling 189 acres near the Onslow and Pender County border south of Maple Hill are proposed for the designation.

Two of the eight units fall in Onslow County.

Unit 2 is 27.1 acres owned by the N.C. Department of Transportation and managed by the N.C. Ecosystem Enhancement Program.

Unit 5 consists of 20.6 acres owned by the N.C. Department of Parks and Recreation and managed as part of the Sandy Run Savannas State Natural Area.

Critical habitat is a term used in the Endangered Species Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species.

Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, establish a refuge or preserve and has no impact on private landowners taking action on their land that do not require federal funding or permits, according to a Fish and Wildlife Service news release.

As a listed species under the Endangered Species Act, golden sedge is already protected wherever it occurs.