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ENDANGERED SPECIES:

FWS proposes protections for 8 Southeast mussels

By Phil Taylor
E&E reporter

The Interior Department today proposed offering federal protections to eight freshwater mussel species and designating nearly 1,500 miles of Southeast streams as critical habitat.

The mussels are among the first of 251 "candidate" species that the Fish and Wildlife Service must evaluate for possible Endangered Species Act protections over the next five years under a landmark settlement it reached this summer with environmental groups (E&ENews PM, July 12).

The eight species -- which have been candidates for protections since 2004 -- are found only in portions of the Escambia, Yellow, Mobile and Choctawhatchee river basins of Alabama and Florida, where their habitats have suffered from water pollution, the agency said.

"These mussels need our help," Cindy Dohner, FWS's Southeast regional director, said in a statement. "They have disappeared from portions of their natural ranges primarily due to habitat deterioration and poor water quality."

Freshwater mussels help filter algae, bacteria and decaying matter from water, purifying it for downstream users, according to environmentalists who have lobbied for their protection. But

the mussels are also particularly sensitive to pollution, including sediment runoff from upstream activities including logging, agriculture and urbanization.

The proposal would list the Alabama pearlshell, round ebonyshell, Southern sandshell, Southern kidneyshell and Choctaw bean as "endangered," and the tapered pigtoe, narrow pigtoe and fuzzy pigtoe as "threatened."

The agency is accepting public comments until Dec. 5 on any new scientific or commercial data on threats to the species, current or planned projects in their habitats and whether the critical habitat designation would affect the economy or national security, among other issues.

FWS said it will also be conducting an economic impact analysis of the critical habitat proposal, which includes nine units in Alabama and Florida, totaling 1,495 miles of stream channel.

If the proposal is finalized, federal agencies would be required to consult with FWS to ensure the projects they approve do not "adversely modify or destroy" the designated habitat.

The decision was cheered by the Center for Biological Diversity, one of two plaintiffs in the settlement that forced the

agency to issue a final decision on their status.

"Protecting these species will also protect streams that give drinking water and recreation to Southeast communities," said Tierra Curry, a conservation biologist with CBD.

The proposed listings will likely be finalized, barring any new contradicting science, Curry said. Until then, federal agencies will be required to consult with FWS on any permitting decisions that could affect the species, as required under Section 7 of the law, she said.

Today's announcement comes one week after Interior said it would conduct reviews to determine whether 374 water-dependent species in the Southeast deserve protection under the Endangered Species Act (Greenwire, Sept. 26).

CBD was among a coalition of groups that petitioned the agency to protect the species in April 2010, citing threats from dams, water diversions and logging, farming and wetlands development (Greenwire, April 21, 2010).

Noah Greenwald, the group's endangered species program director, said he expects FWS to issue a proposal to potentially list 32 Pacific mollusk species within the next couple of weeks, as required by the settlement.

The deadline for sending the so-called 90-day finding to the Federal Register was last week, he said.