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## Agency Plans Protection for Southeast Snake

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By RAMONA YOUNG-GRINDLE  
Tuesday, October 14, 2014

WASHINGTON (CN) - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed listing the black pinesnake as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act due to destruction of its longleaf pine habitat. The agency included a special exemption for herbicide use, controlled burns, restoration work along rivers and streams, and some timber treatments in the proposal.

The non-venomous snake is only found in longleaf pine forests, and lives in only 11 counties in Mississippi and 3 counties in Alabama. The historic population in Louisiana is considered to be locally extinct. The snakes are constrictors that grow up to six feet long, and they feed on rodents and other small animals.

The longleaf pine habitat was once estimated to be 90 million acres across the southeastern states, but that had declined to just three million acres by the 1990s, according to the agency's press release.

The listing resulted from a 2011 settlement with the agency's most frequent litigator, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD). The settlement produced a five-year workplan to fast track listing decisions for hundreds of species across the

country. The USFWS identified the snake as a candidate species in 1982, according to the proposal.

"The black pinesnake is an important part of the longleaf pine ecosystem in southern Alabama and Mississippi," the USFWS' Southeast Regional Director Cindy Dohner said in the agency's press release.

"Conservation efforts for the black pinesnake align closely with efforts already ongoing in this ecosystem for other wildlife like the gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake, dusky gopher frog, and the red-cockaded woodpecker."

Longleaf pine habitat has been decimated by the proliferation of roads, fire suppression activities, conversion of forest to pine plantations, and urban and agricultural development, according to the agency's statement. Roads fragment the habitat areas and lead to "road mortality" of the snakes as well.

"The black pine snake, like the red cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise and dozens of other wildlife species in the Southeast, depends on longleaf pine forests," Collette Adkins Giese said in the CBD's response to the listing proposal. "The proposed listing of yet another longleaf-dependent species should be a wakeup call that the

Southeast is losing its natural heritage through the destruction of this critically endangered ecosystem.”

Because the USFWS has proposed the snake for a threatened listing status, it has also proposed a special exemption under Section 4(d) of the ESA which is not available for species with an endangered status. The special exemption would allow certain levels of harm or mortality to the snakes during activities that are designed to manage the habitat. One threat is from cogon-grass, an invasive exotic weed, which requires controlled burns to keep it in check. Along with other weed control and timber management practices, these activities are considered to be necessary to the overall preservation of the habitat the snakes require, and therefore are seen to be necessary for the overall conservation of the species, according to the action.

The agency noted that it does not have sufficient information to determine critical habitat needs for the snakes at this time.

Comments and information are due Dec. 8, and public hearing requests are due within 45 days of the Oct. 7 publication of the proposed rule.

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