



ENDANGERED SPECIES:

Feds list Puerto Rican warbler as threatened

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The Fish and Wildlife Service is adding a tiny Puerto Rican bird at risk from clearcut coffee plantations to the threatened species list, the agency announced today.

Coffee plantations that are carved out of the island's mountainous forests instead of planted in their shade are one of the main threats to the elfin-woods warbler, the agency said. Other threats include residential development, ranching, fires, hurricanes and climate change.

The threatened listing allowed the agency to issue a special rule allowing certain types of agriculture and forestry work that could temporarily harm the 5-inch, black and white bird, which was first discovered in the dwarf trees of El Yunque National Forest in the 1970s.

These exempted practices include planting native shade and coffee trees, using fertilizers within shade-grown coffee plantations and other sustainable agricultural approaches that will be advantageous for the species in the long term.

FWS also proposed limiting federal development of 27,125 acres of forest in three units for the warbler.

Only 15 percent of that critical habitat is on private lands.

"Actions that benefit this bird and its habitat, such as shade-grown coffee plantations, will have additional benefits to other native wildlife including other endangered species in the area," said Edwin Muñiz, the agency's Caribbean ecological services field office supervisor. "We greatly appreciate all the help from landowners and governmental land managers working cooperatively towards that goal."

The warbler will be formally added to the threatened species list next month, the agency said in the Federal Register. FWS will accept comments on its critical habitat proposal until Aug. 22 and plans to issue a final decision next year.

Since 2014, FWS has been collaborating with the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources and the U.S. Forest Service to proactively conserve the warbler and restore suitable habitat in El Yunque and the Maricao Commonwealth Forest. Under a candidate conservation agreement, the agencies agreed to use best management practices to avoid any potential threat to suitable and occupied elfin-woods warbler habitat and populations.

The agencies are also working to reforest crucial areas and enhance habitat within degraded portions of their forests. FWS hopes public outreach and education programs will also encourage private landowners living near these forests to conserve and restore warbler habitat.

The listing was celebrated by the Center for Biological Diversity, a conservation group that petitioned FWS to protect the warbler under the Endangered Species Act in 2004. The bird had been a candidate for listing for many years before then.

“With the help of the Endangered Species Act, the elfin-woods warbler will recover, like other Puerto Rican birds before it,” said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director at the center.

The agency was forced to decide on the status of the warbler under the ESA as a result of a 2011 settlement agreement between conservationists and FWS that expedited the review of nearly 760 species.