

Rare snake wins protection in Mississippi, Alabama under critical habitat lawsuit

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A rare snake has won protection in two states under a critical habitat lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Tuesday.

As a result of the suit, the wildlife service said 325,679 acres (131,797 hectares) of critical habitat in Mississippi and Alabama will be protected for the rare black pinesnake, which can grow up to 7 feet (2.1 meters) in length. Critical habitat protection means federal agencies must consult with the wildlife service for any federally funded or permitted projects to make sure activities don't hurt the pinesnake or its habitat.

"This will help give these elegant snakes the space and safety they need to survive," said Elise Bennett, an attorney for the center. "Black pinesnakes require both forest habitat and the active reintroduction of fire.



Jim Lee/USFWS/TNC / The black pine snake is a subspecies of pine snake that isn't seen too often in the wild.

Protecting and restoring longleaf pine forests is an important step toward recovering the pinesnake and many other important species in the South."

The new rule will protect eight units of critical habitat, including occupied areas in Forrest, George, Greene, Harrison, Jones, Marion, Perry, Stone and Wayne counties in Mississippi and in Clarke County, Alabama. These areas are already home to pinesnakes and contain crucial habitat features such as deep, sandy soils, unfragmented pine forest and safe refuges.

Federal lands make up about 68% of the proposed protected acreage, with the DeSoto National Forest comprising the majority of five of the critical habitat units, the wildlife service said.

“Longleaf pine habitat has suffered such degradation that diverse species, from the black pinesnake to the gopher tortoise and red-cockaded woodpecker, are facing extinction,” said Bennett. “Protecting this critically endangered habitat will help safeguard the South’s wild heritage for generations.”