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Plants walk in fairy shrimps' footprint

Even so, Fish and Wildlife designates habitat protection for large-flowered woolly meadowfoam and Cook's lomatium

By [Paul Fattig](#)

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Following negotiations with an endangered species watchdog group, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has agreed to designate critical habitat for two rare plants in Jackson and Josephine counties.

Under the settlement, the agency has until the summer of 2010 to complete critical habitat designations for the large-flowered woolly meadowfoam found in the Agate Desert and Cook's lomatium, a member of the carrot family which grows in the Agate Desert and the Illinois Valley. Neither plant is found anywhere else in the world.

Much of the land needed for protecting the plants will probably closely overlay that already established as critical habitat for the fairy shrimp found in the Agate Desert's vernal pools, said Craig Tuss, the agency's field supervisor in Southern Oregon.

"Right now, we have about 7,500 acres in Jackson County for fairy shrimp," Tuss said of designated critical habitat for the threatened species inhabiting vernal pools in the desert. "To me, it's very likely the footprint we have now for the shrimp's critical habitat will be close to the same as that for the plants.

"But that's just my speculation," he cautioned. "We won't get into specifics until next (fiscal) year."

The agency won't have the funds to start the work until the next federal fiscal year begins Oct. 1, he noted.

The recent agreement followed a formal complaint lodged late last year by the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. The group charged the agency with failure to establish critical habitat designation for the plants as required under the Endangered Species Act. The plants were listed as endangered in 2002.

The act specifically requires that critical habitat be designated for all federally listed species, said biologist Andrew Orahoske, a spokesman for the center.

"Critical habitat is one of the most important safety nets for species listed under the Endangered Species Act," he said, noting the added protection will protect all the species dependent on vernal pools in the Agate Desert area. The vernal pools form in depressions in the ground during the wettest times of the year.

An analysis by the center has determined that setting aside critical habitat, followed by a recovery plan, triples a species' ability to survive, he said.

The plants are threatened by urban growth, off-road vehicle abuse, non-native species and destruction of wetlands, he said. The historic range of the plants — 32,000 acres for the lomatium and 20,000 acres for the meadowfoam — has dramatically shrunk over the years, he said.

"This administration has an abysmal record for listing and designating critical habitat," he said, citing in particular the Department of Interior which includes the agency. "We've been taking them to task over their failures.

"But the process is working now," he said. "The agency is going to do their job. The delay is over. But we still want to see the results."

In addition to the two local plants, the agreement includes the San Diego ambrosia, another rare plant declared endangered in 2002. That plant is found in San Diego and Riverside counties of Southern California and in the northern state of Baja, Mexico.

The settlement calls for the agency to propose critical habitat for the lomatium and meadowfoam by July 15, 2009, then finalize the habitat designation by the following July. For the ambrosia, it must propose critical habitat by August 20 of 2009 and finalize it by August 2010.

The meadowfoam's habitat is the same as the vernal pools inhabited by the fairy shrimp while the lomatium can be found in the vernal pools as well as wetlands on private land and U.S. Bureau of Land Management land in the Illinois Valley, Tuss said.

"We won't have any funds to do anything until the next fiscal year," he reiterated. "At that time, we will do our assessment and determine what needs to be done."

Any proposal the agency comes up with will incorporate all laws pertaining to wetlands, he said. The agency will also review any management plans for public lands where the plants are found, he added.

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