

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## FIRST U.S. PLANTS PROPOSED AS ENDANGERED

Seventeen hundred kinds of plants occurring in 46 States will become the first native plants to be listed as endangered under a proposal by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Associate Director Keith M. Schreiner announced today.

The proposal, published recently in the Federal Register, would bring the protection of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 to over 1,700 species representing more than 100 families of plants--about 8 percent of the seed plants and ferns native to this country. Over half of these are found in Hawaii, with California, Texas, and Florida also having considerable numbers. The plants listed range from delicate, 10-inch orchids and insect-eating pitcher plants to 120-foot tall trees with 9-foot leaves, and include many types of wildflowers, cacti, shrubs, grasses, ferns, and other trees. None are major food sources for humans.

Interested persons have until August 16, 1976, to comment on this proposal.

"Most people write off plants when they think of endangered species," Schreiner said, "yet there are many rare insects, snails, and birds which have species-dependent relationships with plants. If the plant goes, so does the animal, and the ultimate effect on the ecosystem could be severe."

The Smithsonian Institution, which was directed by the Endangered Species Act to review the status of plants, found that 3,187 species were likely candidates for either the endangered or threatened lists. The list was published as a Notice of Review in the Federal Register last year. The present proposal includes more than half of these in addition to several which were added as a result of public comments.

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The precise reasons for the decline of all of these species are not yet known; however, it is generally agreed that the destruction of habitat and commercial exploitation have been major causes. Plant habitats are continuously being eliminated by strip mining, overgrazing, timber harvesting, suburban development, road construction, flooding, irrigation, stream channelization, fire, and the drainage of bogs, swamps, and marshes. Commercial and private collectors have been largely responsible for threatening the survival of certain groups of plants, especially cacti. Some of the most rare and beautiful cacti are collected by the truckload and have sold for as much as \$350 each.

Competition from more than 2,000 foreign plant species which have been introduced into this country has also affected native plants. Some, such as the common dandelion from Europe and the honeysuckle from Asia, can become firmly established in new areas and choke off more delicate native plant types.

Disease and pollution have also depleted plant populations. The Florida torreyia, a member of the yew family, is known only from a few counties in Georgia and Florida; it is now almost extinct in the wild due to a fungal disease which attacks the stems.

Most of the plants have extremely limited ranges and are often confined to specialized habitats such as bogs, marshes, river banks, mountain tops, canyon rims, and similar inaccessible areas. Some that were previously thought to be extinct have recently been found to still exist. This was the case with the Ashe birch, a small tree not seen since 1914 until last summer when a few live specimens were found in southwestern Virginia.

If adopted, this rulemaking would regulate interstate and international commerce in these plants. For example, endangered cacti dug from Southwestern deserts could no longer be transported to the east coast for sale in plant shops. In addition, no Federal agency could authorize, fund, or carry out any action that would jeopardize the existence of any listed species. The Act does not prohibit the taking of plants as it does animals, so if they comply with State laws, collectors can still take these species from the wilds.

It is hoped that comments to the Service will bring out any potential problems so that final rules will be effective, fair, and encourage voluntary compliance. Therefore the Service will hold several public hearings in various areas of the country on this proposal and the already proposed plant regulations. The times and locations of these hearings will be announced in the near future.

Interested persons wishing to comment on this rulemaking should write the Director, FWS/LE, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

The comments should address specific locations of plants listed, the nature of the threat to plants in specific locations, nominations for "critical habitat" for specific plant colonies, the extent and impact of regulating commerce in listed plants, and the extent and impact on actions or programs of other Federal agencies by the listing of these plants.