

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1875 Century Boulevard
Suite 410
Atlanta, Georgia 30345
Phone: 404/679-7289
Fax: 404/679-7286
<http://southeast.fws.gov>

News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 5, 2004

Contacts: Timothy Merritt, 931/528-6481, Ext. 211
Tom MacKenzie, 404/679-7291

Eggert's Sunflower Proposed for Removal from Federal Protection

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to remove Eggert's sunflower from its current listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, because recovery efforts have led to new populations being identified and other populations being secured. The plant – which is more adaptable than scientists previously realized – was listed as threatened in 1997.

Eggert's sunflower is a member of the aster family, known by its Latin name as Asteraceae. The plant is known to exist only in Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee. It has large yellow flowers and grows up to eight feet tall. It prefers rolling-to-flat uplands in full sun or partial shade and is often found in open fields or thickets along wooded borders and with other tall plants and small trees. It persists in, and may even invade, roadsides, power line rights-of-way, or fields that have suitable open habitat. Eggert's sunflower was listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened on May 22, 1997.

Unlike the common sunflower – an annual grown for ornamental uses, seed production and oil production – Eggert's sunflower is a perennial that is not grown commercially. Eggert's seeds have recently been collected by the USDA to determine if they contain genetic traits that can be used to improve seed and oil production in commercially grown sunflowers.

At the time of listing, there were 34 known Eggert's sunflower sites. These sites occurred in one county in Alabama, five counties in Kentucky and eight counties in Tennessee.

Presently, there are 279 known Eggert's sunflower sites that form 68 populations:

- Three sites form three populations that span two counties in Alabama;
- Thirty-three sites form 18 populations that span nine counties in Kentucky; and
- Two hundred and forty-three sites form 47 populations that span 15 counties in Tennessee.

Of these, approximately 126 sites form 27 populations occurring on public lands or on land owned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). All sites on Federal lands and the site owned by

TNC are covered by active management plans that will provide for extended conservation of the species. So the recovery goal for Eggert's sunflower – 20 secured populations – will be exceeded by the time this proposed listing becomes final.

In response to an order by the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee, the Service also reconsidered whether designating critical habitat for Eggert's sunflower would be prudent based on the species' current status.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act identifying geographic areas essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

The Service has found that a critical habitat designation will provide no benefit to the species and therefore is not prudent.

If Eggert's sunflower is removed from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, Federal agencies will no longer need to consult with the Service to ensure any action they authorize, fund, or carry out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of this species. The Service is working with the states where the sunflower occurs to develop cooperative management agreements so that the species continues to be monitored and protected once it is removed from the Endangered Species list.

While federally listed fish and wildlife species that occur on private lands may receive more protection under the Endangered Species Act than they receive under State law, Federally listed plants found on private lands do not receive additional protection under the Act. The Act also does not prohibit "take" of listed plants on private lands, but landowners must still comply with state laws protecting imperiled plants.

A complete description of the proposed delisting rule is being published in the *Federal Register* today. Copies of the proposal are available by contacting Timothy Merritt, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 446 Neal Street, Cookeville, Tennessee 38501; phone 931-528-6481, ext. 211.

Public hearings on this proposal will be held if requested. The Service will consider comments and information received by June 3, 2004. Written comments and information on this proposal should be mailed, faxed, or delivered in person to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Attn: Timothy Merritt, 446 Neal Street, Cookeville, Tennessee 38501; Fax: 931-528-7075, or sent by electronic mail to timothy_merritt@fws.gov.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers

the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies. Visit the Service's website at <http://www.fws.gov>.

###