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Draft Recovery Plan/Endangered Species Act: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Public Notice for Ozark Hellbender

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The United States Fish and Wildlife Service ("Service") published a December 22nd Federal Register Notice announcing the availability for public review and comment of a draft recovery plan for the Ozark Hellbender. See 85 Fed. Reg. 83609.

The Ozark hellbender is endemic to the White River drainage in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri.

The Ozark hellbender was listed in October 2011 by the Service as an endangered species under the ESA.

The Ozark hellbender is described as a large, strictly aquatic salamander that may grow up to two feet long. These salamanders need cool, clear streams and rivers with many large rocks. The Service has stated that within the White River watershed, Ozark hellbenders are found primarily in:

- North Fork White River
- Bryant Creek
- Spring River
- Eleven Point River
- Current River

A recovery plan's purpose has been described as providing a roadmap for species' recovery. The goal is to improve the species' status in managing its threats to the point at which protections under the Endangered Species Act ("ESA") are no longer necessary. They are required to be designed in a manner that enables the public and stakeholders to understand the rationale behind the recovery program.

The development of a recovery plan for listed species is required by Section 4f of the ESA unless it would not promote the conservation of a particular species. The plan must, to the maximum extent practicable, include:

1. A description of site-specific management actions as may be necessary to achieve the plan's goals for the conservation and survival of the species;
2. Objective measurable criteria that, when met, would support a determination under Section 4(a)(1) that the species should be removed from the List of Endangered and Threatened Species; and
3. Estimates of the time and cost required to carry out those measures needed to achieve the plan's goal and to achieve intermediate steps towards that goal.

Endangered species are animals and plants that are in danger of becoming extinct.

Ozark hellbenders are deemed to have declined throughout their range and no populations are stable.

The reason for a decline in population has been listed as:

- Habitat loss
- Cover and nest disruption
- Disease
- Abnormalities

The Service states in the December 22nd Federal Register Notice that to downlist the Ozark hellbender certain criteria should be achieved for each of the three populations (the North Fork White River, Eleven Point River, and Current River):

1. There is a positive population trend for a 15 year period.
2. There is evidence of successful recruitment to maintain a sustaining population, with recruitment defined as attainment of sexual maturity by young.
3. Habitat quantity and quality are sufficient to support all life stages.
4. Within each watershed the number and distribution of occupied habitat patches and abundance of individuals within these patches is such that:
 1. The population is resilient to stochastic and catastrophic events, and
 2. Connectivity and gene flow is sufficient to maintain genetic diversity and provide for natural re-establishment if a patch is extirpated.
5. Causes of population declines have been identified, and it is clear what actions are needed to address these threats.

A copy of the Federal Register Notice can be downloaded [here](#).