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# Fresh Water Mussel/Southern Elktoe: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Endangered Species Designation/Critical Habitat

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The United States Fish and Wildlife Service ("Service") published a June 21st Federal Register Notice proposing to list the southern elktoe as endangered under the Endangered Species Act ("ESA"). See 88 Fed. Reg. 40160.

The proposed rule also designates critical habitat for the species.

The southern elktoe is described as a medium-sized freshwater mussel that reaches up to 2.8 inches in length. It is endemic to the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint Basin of Alabama, Georgia, and Florida.

The species' habitat includes permanently flowing creeks and rivers with natural hydrologic regimes. It most often occurs in areas with slow current along stream margins. Further, it prefers deposition habitats consisting of mixtures of silty mud, sand, and gravel. A distinguishing characteristic from other freshwater mussel species is it does not occur in dense beds.

For an endangered species listing the ESA requires that the Service identify one of the following factors:

1. the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range;
2. over utilization for commercial, recreation, scientific, or educational purposes;
3. disease or predation;
4. the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or
5. other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

The Service listed as threats to the southern elktoe as including:

- Intensive row crop agricultural practices including pumping groundwater for agricultural practices which decreases spring outflows and lower stream levels
- River regulation interrupting flow regimes
- Water quality since mussels are often the first organisms to respond to water quality impacts
- Changing climate conditions which may result in changes to hydrologic conditions, including increased flooding, prolonged droughts, reduced stream flows, and changes in salinity levels
- Nonnative species

The proposed critical designation includes approximately 578 river miles encompassing certain Alabama and Georgia counties.

A draft economic analysis of the proposed designation of critical habitat is noted to be available for review.

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