

Black Pinesnake Draft Recovery Plan Available

A draft recovery plan is now available for the black pinesnake, a stout, brown to black, non-venomous snake, that is currently federally listed as threatened. This plan includes specific criteria for determining when the black pinesnake should be considered for delisting, removing it from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. It also lists site-specific actions that will be necessary to meet those criteria and estimates the time and costs required for implementing actions necessary to achieve recovery.

The black pinesnake was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) on October 6, 2015, along with a 4(d) rule to provide for the conservation of the species. It historically slithered through the longleaf pine forests of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Now the snake has disappeared from Louisiana, and its populations are declining in Alabama and Mississippi primarily due to habitat loss and degradation. Habitat requirements for the black pinesnake consist of sandy, well-drained soils with an open-canopied overstory of longleaf pine, a reduced shrub layer, and abundant vegetative groundcover. These ideal habitat conditions for the pinesnake declined due to deforestation, fire suppression, and conversion to commercial pine plantations, agriculture, and urban development.

According to the draft recovery plan and based on the best currently available scientific information, the black pinesnake may be considered for delisting when these criteria are met: (1) at least nine geographically distinct black pinesnake populations occur across the species' range, with at least six in Mississippi and at least three in Alabama; and (2) monitoring demonstrates that these populations are viable, as evidenced by a population estimate of at least 50 black pinesnakes or 25 female black pinesnakes. These populations also must have stable or increasing population growth rates, and they should occur on tracts of at least 5,000 acres of mostly unfragmented upland pine forest habitat. In addition, threats of habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation must be managed. Concurrently, populations will be protected by long-term conservation mechanisms and managed to promote open-canopied upland pine habitat, native plant community integrity, and growth of black pinesnake populations.

To promote and support the conservation and survival of endangered and threatened species, and provide a transparent path to achieving recovery, the Service and its partners develop and implement recovery plans. Recovery plans are unique to each species and serve as central organizing tools that provide important guidance on methods of minimizing threats to listed species, such as restoring and acquiring habitat, removing introduced predators or invasive species, conducting surveys, monitoring individual populations, and breeding species in captivity and releasing them into their historical range. Recovery plans identify measurable and objective criteria against which progress toward recovery of a species can be tracked over time. Recovery plans are guidance and not regulatory documents, and no agency or entity is required by the ESA to implement actions in a recovery plan.

The Service is seeking review and comment on this draft recovery plan from local, state, and federal agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and the public. Specifically, we are seeking submission of any information that enhances the necessary understanding of the (1) subspecies' biology and threats and (2) recovery needs and related implementation issues or concerns. This ensures that we have assembled, considered, and incorporated the best available scientific and commercial information into the draft recovery plan for this species.

The draft recovery plan will be made available at:

<https://www.fws.gov/program/recovery/recovery-plans>

and the Jackson, Mississippi Ecological Services Field Office. To obtain a copy by mail, send a request to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mississippi Ecological Services Field Office, 6578 Dogwood View Pkwy, Jackson, MS 39213, or by phone: 601-965-4900.

To ensure consideration, the Service must receive written comments on or before May 11, 2023. However, we will accept information about any species at any time. Submit comments in writing to James Austin, Field Supervisor at james_austin@fws.gov or by mail to the Mississippi Ecological Services Field Office.

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