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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Southeast Region 4

Golden Sedge Provided Endangered Species Act Protection

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that golden sedge (*Carex lutea*), a perennial plant found only in North Carolina, has been added to the federal list of endangered and threatened species as endangered. A species is designated endangered when it is in danger of becoming extinct in the foreseeable future.

Biologists have located golden sedge in only eight locations, all in coastal savannas in Onslow and Pender Counties that are underlain by calcareous, or chalk, deposits. Most of these remaining golden sedge populations are small, with three populations composed of fewer than 50 individual plants. All but one of the surviving populations occur on privately held land.

"In several of the populations, biologists recorded population declines of more than 80 percent in surveys between 1992 and 1996," said the Service's Southeast Regional Director, Sam D. Hamilton.

The Endangered Species Act does not prohibit the taking of listed plants on private land, but landowners must comply with state laws protecting imperiled plants. Consultations with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service come into play for private and other landowners only when federal funding or permits are required for activities that may affect listed species.

Little of the species' coastal plain habitat remains in the southeastern United States. Historically, naturally occurring fires that controlled undergrowth kept these coastal grasslands and surrounding longleaf pine forests relatively open. These fires are suppressed now, making the habitat less favorable for golden sedge and numerous other species of plants and wildlife. Drainage ditching, mining, bulldozing, and road-building also have harmed the species in the past, and they continue to pose a threat. Logging, if done with care, does not harm the plants.

The remaining populations occupy relatively small areas. Five of the populations, for example, occupy a combined area totaling less than 69 square yards. One of the

populations occurs on a roadside and another is found on a power line right-of-way, where the plants are at risk of destruction from herbicide application or highway maintenance or expansion operations.

"Being restricted to small areas at a few isolated sites means the species is in a particularly precarious position," Hamilton said. "For example, with so few plants, we are concerned about long-term genetic viability of the species. It is also unlikely the species will re-colonize areas from which it has vanished."

Service personnel have worked with landowners and the State of North Carolina to define the species' habitat requirements and to prevent further adverse impacts at their remaining sites. The Service is now working with North Carolina's Natural Heritage Program and Plant Conservation Program, The Nature Conservancy, and landowners to develop protection and management plans for each site.

Designation of critical habitat for the golden sedge is being deferred at this time, due to budgetary constraints associated with the Service's national threatened and endangered species listing program.

Golden sedge is a perennial member of the sedge family with yellowish green, grass-like leaves. Fertile stems may reach three feet or more and produce many flowers. It is distinguished from other *Carex* species that occur in the same habitat by its yellowish color and by its height and slenderness.

Native plants are important for their ecological, economic, and aesthetic values. Plants play an important role in the development of crops that resist disease, insects, and drought. At least 25 percent of prescription drugs contain ingredients derived from plant compounds, including those that provide treatments for cancer, juvenile leukemia, heart disease, and malaria and medicines to assist in organ transplants. Plants are also being used to develop natural pesticides.

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 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System that encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 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.

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