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Okaloosa Darter On the Road to Recovery

Dr. Donald Imm, Email: Donald_Imm@fws.gov, Phone: (850) 769-0552, ext. 247

Denise Rowell, Email: Denise_rowell@fws.gov, Phone: (251) 441-6630

Tom MacKenzie, Email: Tom_MacKenzie@fws.gov, Phone: (404) 679-7291

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed reclassifying the Okaloosa Darter (*Etheostoma okaloosae*) (Fig. 1) from the status of endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act, saying that the small fish is making major strides in its fight for recovery. The rule was published in the February 2, 2010 *Federal Register*, and the public is invited to comment on the proposal during the next 60 days — until April 5, 2010.

“Resource management on Eglin Air Force Base has significantly reduced the threat of habitat destruction,” said Cindy Dohner, the Service’s Southeast Regional Director. “Given this reduction in threats and the large and increasing populations in the majority of the Okaloosa Darter’s habitat, the Service has determined the species is no longer in danger of extinction.”

Originally listed as endangered in 1973, the Okaloosa Darter is a small fish known to occur only in six clear stream systems draining into two Choctawhatchee Bay bayous in Walton and Okaloosa counties in northwest Florida. Most of this watershed drainage area is under the management of Eglin Air Force Base, as is most of the darter’s present range. The remainder of the watershed and the species’ range lies within the cities of Niceville and Valparaiso.

Prior to proposing reclassification of the species, the Service carefully assessed the best scientific and commercial data available regarding threats faced by the Okaloosa Darter.

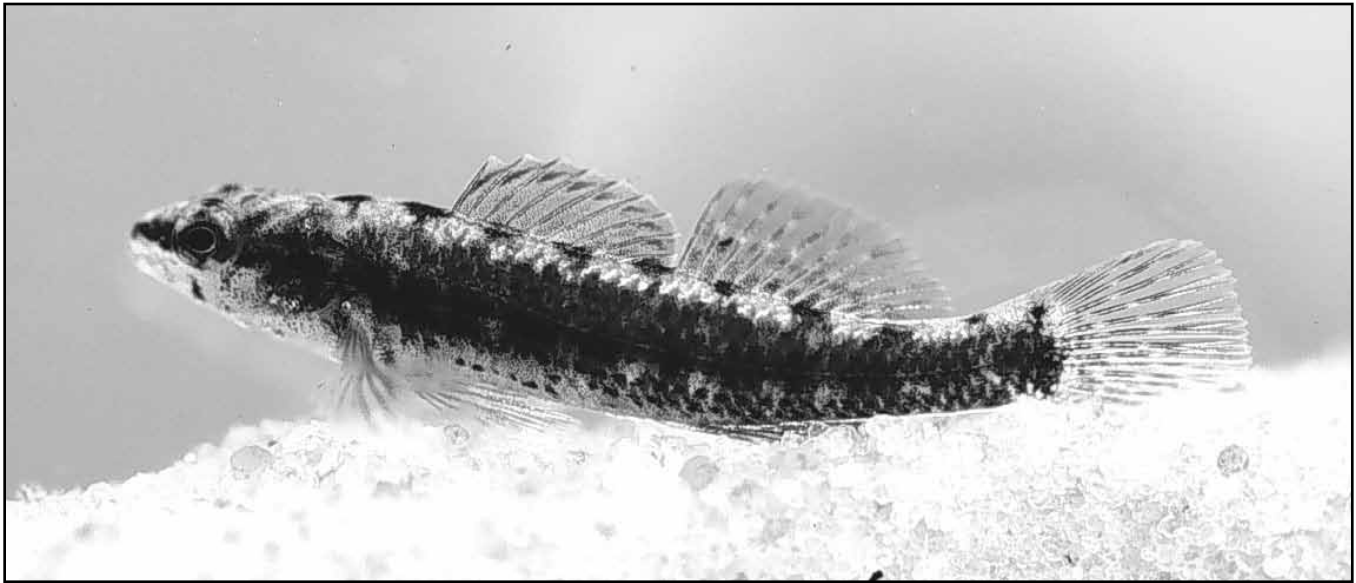
Working in partnership, the Service and Eglin Air Force Base have accomplished a significant number of recovery efforts for the darter. As of 2009, Eglin’s natural resource

managers have estimated that 98% of the erosion occurring in darter watersheds had been eliminated. In addition, a crucial project outlined in the Service’s Okaloosa Darter Recovery Plan, the Mill Creek stream restoration project is finished. The Mill Creek project is located on the Eglin Golf Course. During initial construction of the golf course, the stream was substantially altered by culverts and other man-made impoundments. With the help of partners, such as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC) and students from the Young Women’s Leadership School of Harlem NYC, approximately 2,500 feet of Mill Creek were restored. As a result, darters were found swimming in the stream within weeks of the project’s completion.

In 2009, the Service and Eglin Air Force Base started yet another Okaloosa Darter habitat restoration project. This latest project involves removing a fish barrier and opening up five miles of stream habitat. This will be done by removing the Anderson Pond dam and restoring stream connectivity. With the help of our partners, including FFWCC, this project will include design and construction of 3,000 linear feet of stream channel and riparian floodplain to assure in-stream habitat, stable flow and sediment dynamics throughout Anderson Branch.

Service biologists continue to work with our community partners in the cities of Niceville and Valparaiso to recover the Okaloosa Darter through improvements in quality and restoration of streams in these urbanized areas.

Written comments on the Service’s proposal to reclassify the Okaloosa Darter to threatened status will be accepted



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Fig. 1.

The Okaloosa Darter (*Etheostoma okaloosae*).

through April 5, 2010. Comments should be submitted by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2008-0071, Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

Copies of the proposed rule are available by contacting Dr. Don Imm, Deputy Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1601 Balboa Avenue, Panama City, Florida 32405 (telephone (850) 769-0552, extension 247; facsimile (850) 763-2177). The proposed rule can also be found on the Service's website at <http://www.fws.gov/panamacity/>.

The Okaloosa Darter is proposed for reclassification since it does not meet the criteria to be defined as an endangered species. An endangered species is defined as being in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future. A threatened classification means a species could become endangered. Reclassifying a species from endangered to the less-critical threatened designation is reflective of recovery efforts reducing imminent threats and allowing populations to increase.

The threatened status also offers additional flexibility in how the species is protected and managed for recovery.

Although the status of this species is proposed to be changed from endangered to threatened, section seven of the Endangered Species Act and regulations codified at 50 CFR 402 will still require federal agencies to ensure that activities they authorize, fund, or carry out are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of this species. In addition, the species would remain fully protected under the Act as a threatened species.

The Act and its implementing regulations set forth a series of general prohibitions and exceptions that apply to all threatened wildlife. The prohibitions make it illegal for any person subject to the jurisdiction of the United States to take (includes harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct), import or export, ship in interstate commerce in the course of commercial activity, or sell or offer for sale in interstate or foreign commerce any listed species. It is also illegal to possess, sell, deliver, carry, transport, or ship any such wildlife that has been taken illegally.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Visit the Service's websites at <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/> or <http://www.fws.gov/> 