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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Finalizes Critical Habitat for Threatened Black Pinesnake

*Over 324,000 acres in Mississippi and Alabama
Designated to Help in Species' Conservation*

Daphne, Alabama – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has finalized critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for the black pinesnake, a non-venomous constrictor found only in Mississippi and Alabama. This native reptile was listed as threatened under the ESA in 2015 following population declines due to habitat loss and degradation.

The black pinesnake is native to longleaf pine forests, one of the world's most ecologically diverse natural places and one that is in peril. Longleaf pine forests once covered more than 90 million acres from the South Atlantic Coastal Plain of southern Virginia to the West Gulf Coastal Plain of Texas. Today, less than five percent of the original forests remain.

“The designation of critical habitat for the black pinesnake is a science-based decision that will help move it toward recovery,” said Regional Director Leo Miranda. “I am thankful for all the partners that provided comments to make this rule a much better one for the snake and all the landowners who help protect it.”

The black pinesnake's habitat overlaps with three other federally listed wildlife (gopher tortoise, dusky gopher frog and red-cockaded woodpecker) that have similar management needs. In addition to helping safeguard a healthy environment for the species to thrive, establishing critical habitat also helps to raise public awareness and focus the efforts of our conservation partners.

The ESA requires the Service to identify areas essential to the conservation of endangered or threatened species, which it terms critical habitat. The designation of critical habitat on private land has no impact on individual landowner activities unless they involve federal funding, permits or activities. Critical habitat designation does not affect land ownership or establish a wildlife refuge, reserve, preserve, or other conservation areas. Landowners will not be required to convert their land to longleaf pine forest or to conduct black pinesnake monitoring as a result of this designation. Rather, critical habitat designation informs landowners and the public which specific areas are important to black pinesnake conservation and recovery.

The eight critical habitat units designated for black pinesnake comprise approximately 324,679 acres in southern Mississippi (Forrest, George, Greene, Harrison, Jones, Marion, Perry, Stone and Wayne counties), and southwest Alabama (Clarke County). The black pinesnake currently occupies all of the designated units. Most of the critical habitat (68 percent) is under federal

ownership, with approximately 28 percent on private lands, and three percent on state lands. The primary federal landowner is the U.S. Forest Service, as the majority of five of the six units in Mississippi are on the De Soto National Forest.

For more information about the final critical habitat designation for the black pinesnake, visit: <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/tags/black-pinesnake/>.

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. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwssoutheast, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwssoutheast>.

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