

Frequently Asked Questions
**Cedar Key Mole Skink Proposed Listing and Critical
Habitat**

Q: What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking?

A: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to list the Cedar Key mole skink as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The rule also proposes critical habitat for the species.

Q: Why is the Service proposing to list the Cedar Key mole skink as endangered?

A: The ESA describes two categories of species that need protection: threatened and endangered. An endangered animal or plant is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range; a threatened animal or plant is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future.

The Service has determined that the Cedar Key mole skink fits the definition of an endangered species primarily due to sea level rise driven by climate change.

Q: What is the Cedar Key mole skink?

A: Documented in small numbers on 10 of the islands of the Cedar Keys in Levy County, Florida, the slim, tan Cedar Key mole skink is an elusive lizard that can grow to just under six inches long. Its tiny legs help to propel it through the sand on the beaches and other coastal habitats of the Cedar Keys. These mole skinks burrow in the sand and under beach wrack (commonly seagrass) washed up beyond the high tide and in the sandy soils under leaf litter and debris in the adjacent habitats. They dine on roaches, spiders, crickets, and other insects that live within and under the decaying wrack, leaf litter and debris. Scientists believe mother skinks stay with their eggs in the nest chamber, licking and turning their eggs until they hatch.

Q: Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designating critical habitat for the Cedar Key mole skink?

A: Critical habitat, as defined by the ESA, is a specific geographic area that contains features essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species that may require special management and protection. Critical habitat may include areas that are not currently occupied by the species but are essential for its conservation.

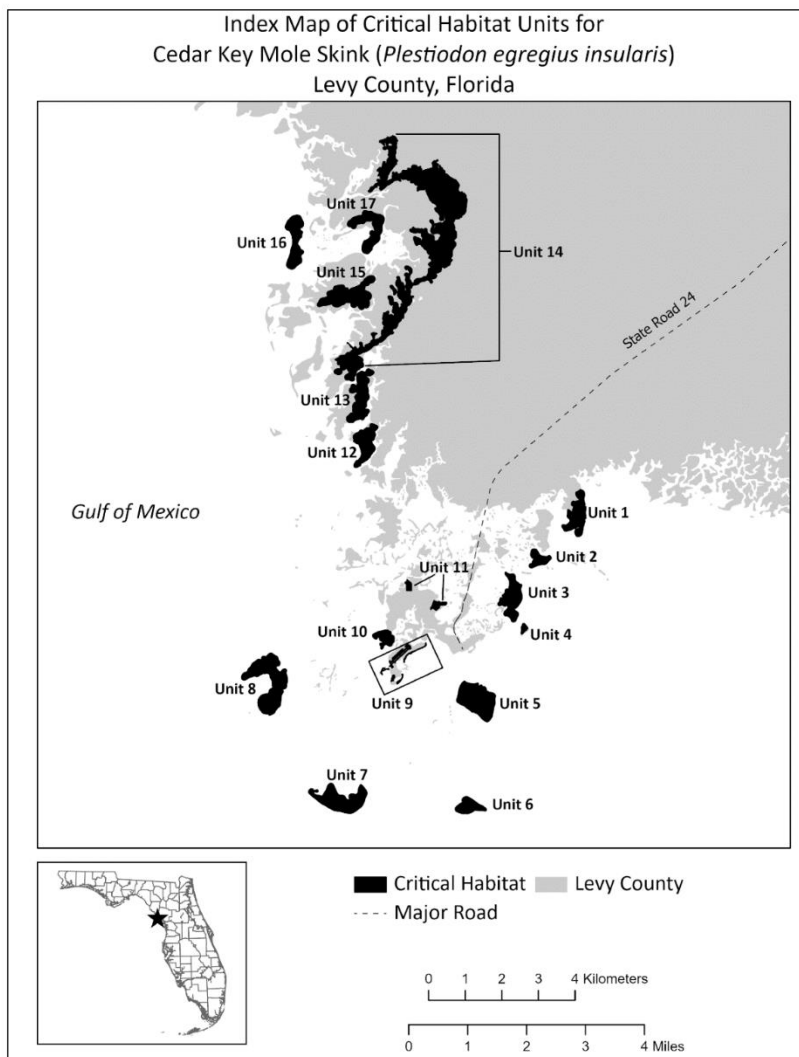
Q: What is the proposed critical habitat?

A: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to designate approximately 2,713 acres in 17 units as critical habitat for the Cedar Key mole skink within the Cedar Keys of Levy County, Florida. Of the 17 proposed units, 8 units totaling 940 acres are considered occupied, and 9 units totaling 1,773 acres are considered unoccupied. All units are within the historical range of the

subspecies and contain the physical and biological feature essential to the conservation of the subspecies including natural habitats, suitable soils and sufficient, appropriate groundcover.

Approximately 42 percent (1,139 acres) of the proposed critical habitat for the Cedar Key mole skink overlaps with proposed critical habitat for the red knot, a federally threatened species. Additionally, 100 percent of the proposed critical habitat for the Cedar Key mole skink overlaps with other co-occurring listed species including piping plovers, eastern black rails, Florida scrub-jays, eastern indigo snakes, and Florida salt marsh voles.

The proposed critical habitat designation includes lands under Federal (37 percent), State (14 percent), local (County; 1 percent), private (36 percent), and other (unidentified ownership including water or marsh; 12 percent) jurisdictions.



Index Map of Critical Habitat Units for Cedar Key mole skink

Q: Why are you proposing to designate unoccupied critical habitat for the Cedar Key mole skink?

A: Given that six out of eight islands currently occupied by the Cedar Key mole skink are projected to lose 75 to 90 percent or more of their preferred habitat, we have determined that areas of unoccupied habitat outside of its currently known area of occupancy are essential for the conservation of the species.

Q: How do these designations affect private landowners and developers?

A: Designating critical habitat under the ESA does not affect private landowners unless they implement an action involving federal funds, permits, or activities. It does not affect land ownership, nor establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation area, nor does it allow the government or public to access private lands. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that could affect critical habitat must consult with the Service to make sure their actions do not adversely modify or destroy it.

Additionally, when determining these proposed critical habitat boundaries, the Service made every effort to avoid including large areas of agriculture or developed areas such as lands devoid of native vegetation or covered by buildings, pavement and other structures. Most of the proposed area is within conservation lands.

Q: Does critical habitat designation affect activities that occur within the designated area?

A: Critical habitat designation does not necessarily restrict activities, but federal agencies must make special efforts to protect the important characteristics of these areas. For activities that involve a federal permit, license, or funding, and are likely to destroy or adversely modify the area of critical habitat that will be affected, the Service will work with the action agency and, where appropriate, private or other landowners, to amend the project, allowing it to proceed without adversely affecting the critical habitat. Thus, most federal projects are likely to go forward, but some will be modified to minimize harm to critical habitat.

Q: How did the Service determine what areas to designate as critical habitat?

Biologists considered physical and biological features the species needs for survival and reproduction which includes:

- Natural habitats (including, but not limited to beaches, dunes, coastal hammock, and other habits with sandy soils) along the Cedar Key archipelago coast that contain:
- Suitable soils (e.g., dry, loose, sandy, permeable, or friable soils); and
- Sufficient, appropriate ground cover (including, but not limited to tidal wrack deposited above the mean high-water line, leaf litter, and vegetative debris).