

Lower Suwannee & Cedar Keys
National Wildlife Refuges
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News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Public Notice of Availability for Comment:

Finding of No Significant Impact for Field Release of *Pseudophilothrips ichini*, (Thysanoptera: Phlaeothripidae), for Biological Control of the Brazilian Peppertree, *Schinus terebinthifolius*.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has analyzed a management action on the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The management action is to conduct the environmental release of an insect, *Pseudophilothrips ichini* (common name “thrips”) (Thysanoptera: Phlaeothripidae), on Refuge lands. Thrips will be used for the biological control of the noxious, invasive-exotic Brazilian peppertree (BP), *Schinus terebinthifolius*, with the agent (the thrips insect) released directly on the actual invasive BP target plants. Brazilian peppertree is one of the most aggressive and widespread of the invasive non-indigenous exotic pest plants in the state of Florida with over 700,000 infested acres. Thrips releases will occur by Refuge staff or under a Special Use Permit for our state of Florida partners conducting invasive species control.

Federal law requires that the Service first allow the public to review this action prior to conducting this release on the Refuge. We do not see the thrips release to impair existing wildlife-dependent recreational use or any other use of a National Wildlife Refuge. Based on sound professional judgment this action will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the purposes for which the Refuge was established and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The Service has analyzed this action and is now adopting the 2019 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service’s (APHIS) Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) based on the USDA APHIS’s Environmental Assessment, which were written and approved for the entire United States. The Service was involved with the USDA by participating in the USDA Thrips Technical Advisory Committee and as part of their thrips working groups.

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The Endangered Species Act (ESA) directs all Federal agencies to conserve endangered and threatened species and to use their authorities to further the purposes of the ESA. Section 7 of the ESA, called "Interagency Cooperation," is the mechanism by which Federal agencies ensure the actions they take, including those they fund or authorize, do not jeopardize the existence of any listed species. The Service issued a Section 7 in support of the USDA's EA and FONSI, concurring with the USDA's findings of not likely to adversely affect on the thrips release program for the entire U.S. Additionally, the Service issued a separate Section 7 with findings of not likely to adversely affect, for the thrips release specifically on the Refuge. The USDA APHIS EA and FONSI were publicly reviewed and finalized under the USDA's public review processes in 2019.

This past summer the Refuge developed a [compatibility determination \(CD\)](#) to facilitate evaluation of a thrips release as a proposed use. This including anticipated impacts and stipulations necessary to ensure compatibility to Refuge purposes. The Refuge publicly posted the Draft CD, covering the anticipated scope of the activity for public review and comment, to news outlets and websites for 30 days in June to July 2020. Included in that publicly posted proposed CD were references in the body of the document and web-links to the USDA APHIS EA and FONSI. Subsequently the Service determined that the thrips release was a management action and was not to be reviewed under a CD process. Thus, in order to institute a thrips release as a management action, the Refuge analyzed this action as such and developed our own FONSI, adopting the USDA 2019 FONSI. The management action of releasing thrips will be no different than what was proposed under a CD. For this use, the management action process is more appropriate than the CD process.

The National Wildlife Refuge System mission is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The purposes for establishing the Lower Suwannee NWR as stated in the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan of 2001 is "to protect, maintain, enhance, and where appropriate, restore habitats along the lower reaches of the Suwannee River.

The Service would like to know what you think of this proposed refuge management action. All comments received within 30 days following the date of this notice will be considered in finalizing the public review of our FONSI. We hope to make a final decision on this proposed action within 14 days following closure of the public review period.

To review the Refuge's FONSI and the USDA APHIS's EA and FONSI visit the following websites at:

- 1) https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Lower_Suwannee/; or
- 2) The Friends of the Lower Suwannee and Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges at <https://www.friendsofrefuges.org/>.

Copies of these documents may also be viewed at the refuge office located at 16450 NW 31st Place, Chiefland, FL 32626. To access the office please make an appointment by calling Andrew's cell at 703.622.3896 or desk at 352.493.0238 ext. 224.

All comments should be in writing and must be received no later than **6 December 2020**. Comments should specifically articulate how the proposed management action would, or would not, materially interfere with or detract from the Refuge purposes or Refuge System mission.

Comments should be addressed to:

Email:

Andrew_Gude@fws.gov; Subject Line: "Thrips Release";

or,

Mail:

"Thrips Release" c/o Andrew Gude, Lower Suwannee NWR, 16450 NW 31st Place, Chiefland, FL 32626.

If commenting via email, please place the words "**Thrips Release**" in the subject line and your comments in the body of the text. Please do not include attachments because they will not be opened due to the potential of computer viruses.

To request a copy of the documents related to this management action, learn the final decision regarding this proposed use, or for more information, contact Refuge Manager Andrew Gude or find it on our website at https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Lower_Suwannee/.