Dated: October 16, 1998.

Jamie Rappaport Clark,

Director, Fish and Wildlife Service.

[FR Doc. 98–30540 Filed 11–13–98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4310–55–P

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

50 CFR Part 17

Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; 90-Day Finding for a Petition to List Silene spaldingii (Spalding's catchfly) as Endangered or Threatened

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Notice of 90-day petition finding and initiation of status review.

SUMMARY: We (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) are announcing a 90-day finding on a petition to list *Silene spaldingii* (Spalding's catchfly) under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (Act). We find that the petition presents substantial information indicating that listing this plant species may be warranted. With publication of this finding, we are initiating a status review for this species, which occurs in southeastern Washington, adjacent portions of Idaho and Oregon, and northwestern Montana.

DATES: The finding announced in this document was made on November 5, 1998. To be considered in the 12-month finding for this petition, information and comments concerning this finding should be submitted to us by January 15, 1999.

ADDRESSES: Data, information, comments, or questions concerning this finding should be submitted to the Supervisor, Snake River Basin Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, Idaho 83709. The petition finding and supporting data are available for public inspection, by appointment, during normal business hours at the above address.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Edna Rey-Vizgirdas, botanist, at the above address (telephone: 208/378–5243).

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

Section 4(b)(3)(A) of the Endangered Species Act (Act) of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), requires that we make a finding on whether a petition to list, delist, or reclassify a species presents substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the requested action may be warranted. This finding is to be based on all information available to us at the time the finding is made. To the maximum extent practicable, this finding is to be made within 90 days following receipt of the petition, and the finding is to be published promptly in the **Federal Register**. If the finding is that substantial information was presented, we also are required to promptly commence a review of the status of the species involved, if one has not already been initiated under our internal candidate assessment process.

The processing of this petition conforms with our listing priority guidance published in the **Federal Register** on May 8, 1998 (63 FR 25502). This guidance clarifies the order in which we will process rulemakings giving highest priority (Tier 1) to processing emergency listings, second priority (Tier 2) to resolving the listing status of outstanding proposed listings, resolving the conservation status of candidate species, processing administrative findings on petitions to add species to the Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, or reclassify species from threatened to endangered status, and delisting or downlisting (reclassifying from endangered to threatened status) actions. The processing of critical habitat designations are the lowest priority actions and are placed in Tier 3. The processing of this petition finding is a Tier 2 action.

We have made a 90-day finding on a petition to list *Silene spaldingii* (Spalding's catchfly). The petition, dated February 23, 1995, was submitted by the Biodiversity Legal Foundation (BLF) of Boulder, Colorado, the Montana and Washington Native Plant Societies, and Mr. Peter Lesica of Missoula, Montana (BLF et al. 1995). The petition requested listing of *Silene spaldingii* within the conterminous United States as threatened or endangered under the Act, and was received by us on February 27, 1995. The petition requested that the species be listed as threatened or endangered across its entire known historic range, which includes southeastern Washington, adjacent portions of Oregon and Idaho, and northwestern Montana. The petition submitted information stating that this species is threatened by improper livestock grazing practices, competition with non-native and woody vegetation, improper herbicide application, inbreeding depression, and fire suppression.

A member of the pink family (Caryophyllaceae), *Silene spaldingii* is a long-lived perennial herb that grows 20 to 40 centimeters (cm) (8 to 16 inches (in)) tall (Lesica 1993, Lesica and Heidel 1996). It has four to seven pairs of lance-shaped leaves, and a spirally arranged inflorescence (flower cluster) consisting of small greenish-white flowers which range from 1 to 2 cm (0.4 to 0.8 in) long (Lesica 1993, Lesica and Heidel 1996). The foliage is lightly to densely covered with sticky hairs. The species was originally described by Watson (1875).

The distribution and habitat of *S. spaldingii* are limited. This species is primarily restricted to slopes, flats, or swales (marshy lands) in mesic grasslands or steppe vegetation of the Palouse region in southeastern Washington, northwestern Montana, and adjacent portions of Idaho and Oregon; one plant was located in British Columbia, directly adjoining a Montana population. Large-scale ecological changes in the Palouse region over the past several decades, including agricultural conversion, changes in fire frequency, and alterations of hydrology, have resulted in the decline of numerous sensitive plant species including *S. spaldingii* (Tisdale 1961). More than 98 percent of the original Palouse prairie habitat has been lost or modified by agricultural conversion, grazing, invasion of non-native species, altered fire regimes, and urbanization (Noss et al. 1995).

Silene spaldingii is currently known from approximately 94 occurrences or sites in Idaho, Oregon, Montana, and Washington; only 12 percent of these (11 sites) contain more than 100 individuals (Heidel 1995, Lichthardt 1997, Idaho Conservation Data Center 1998, Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) 1998, Oregon Natural Heritage Program (ONHP)1998, Washington Natural Heritage Program (WNHP) 1998). This species is State listed as endangered in Oregon, and threatened in Washington. In Idaho and Montana, there are no State Endangered Species Acts, but *Silene spaldingii* is listed by the Idaho Conservation Data Center and MNHP as very rare (Lesica and Heidel 1996, Lichthardt 1997, Idaho Conservation Data Center 1998, MNHP 1998, ONHP 1998, WNHP 1998). The estimated total number of individuals for *S. spaldingii* is fewer than 14,000 (Heidel 1995).

Habitat degradation and competition associated with the invasion of exotic plant species continues to threaten this species, including sites on public lands. For example, the population of *S. spaldingii* in the Kramer Palouse Biological Study Area in Washington declined from 147 to 10 individuals during the period from 1981 to 1994,

apparently due to encroachment by the exotic yellow star-thistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*) and woody vegetation (Heidel 1995). Exotic plant species compete for water, nutrients, and light, in addition to competition for pollinators (Lesica and Heidel 1996). Herbicide application to reduce or eliminate the exotics has the potential to kill non-target species such as *S. spaldingii* (BLF et al.1995).

Fire suppression apparently contributes to a decline in suitable habitat conditions for *S. spaldingii* (B. Heidel, MNHP, pers. comm. 1998), facilitating the encroachment of woody vegetation and other plant species. Fire may be necessary for survival of *S. spaldingii* populations; Lesica (1992) found that recruitment of *S. spaldingii* was enhanced following fire.

Silene spaldingii reproduces by seed and requires bumblebees to pollinate the flowers. Competition for pollinators has been noted at a number of *S. spaldingii* sites that have large populations of other flowering plant species. Reduced pollinator activity has the potential to adversely affect fertility and fitness of the species, resulting in inbreeding depression and declines in small populations (Lesica 1993, Lesica and Heidel 1996).

Climatic fluctuations can also adversely affect this species, and contribute to the extirpation of small populations. For example, a *S. spaldingii* population at Wild Horse Island (Montana) declined from approximately 250 to 10 plants, due primarily to drought conditions in the late 1980's (BLF et al. 1995, Heidel 1995, Lesica 1988). Such reductions in population size are often exacerbated by other factors including pollinator competition and poor reproductive success.

We have reviewed the petition, the literature cited in the petition, and other information available in our files. On the basis of the best scientific and commercial information available, we find that the petition presents substantial information that listing of *Silene spaldingii* may be warranted. The available information suggests that the species' restricted range and small population size increase the likelihood of extirpation from random or localized events such as trampling, herbicide application, drought, competition, and reduced pollinator activity. At least 25 *S. spaldingii* populations may have been extirpated; two of these are known to have been extirpated since 1991 (Heidel 1995, Lichthardt 1997, MNHP 1998, WNHP 1998).

We hereby announce the formal review of the species' status pursuant to this 90-day finding. We request any additional data, comments, and suggestions from the public, other concerned governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties concerning the status of *S. spaldingii.* Of particular interest, is information regarding the existence and status of additional populations, environmental factors determining distribution, pollinators, and genetic variability in known populations.

References Cited

A complete list of all references cited herein, as well as others, is available upon request from the Snake River Basin Office (see **ADDRESSES** section).

Author

The primary author of this document is Edna Rey-Vizgirdas, Snake River Basin Office (see **ADDRESSES** section).

Authority

The authority for this action is the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*).

Dated: November 5, 1998.

Jamie Rappaport Clark,

Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

[FR Doc. 98–30539 Filed 11–13–98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4310–55–P