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Lawsuit Launched to Speed Endangered Species Protection for Ghost Orchid

Rare Flower Threatened by Poaching, Habitat Destruction, Climate Change

HOLLYWOOD, Fla.— The Institute for Regional Conservation, the Center for Biological Diversity and the National Parks Conservation Association notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today of their intent to sue the agency for delaying critically needed Endangered Species Act protection for the ghost orchid.

The Service missed the mandatory deadline to make a decision on whether to protect the ghost orchid in January. The agency’s recently released [workplan](#) reveals that the rare flower is not slated to receive a protection decision until as late as fall 2026.

“We are highly disappointed that we must resort to a lawsuit to get the ghost orchid the legal protection imperative for its survival,” said George Gann, executive director at The Institute for Regional Conservation. “However, we cannot let bureaucratic inertia and inadequate funding for the Endangered Species Act lead to the extinction of this amazing icon of the Greater Everglades — that would be a senseless and unnecessary tragedy.”

“With so many threats facing the ghost orchid, time is running out for these lovely spirits of our swamps,” said attorney Elise Bennett, Florida and Caribbean director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “These enchanting flowers need the Endangered Species Act to help stave off proposed oil drilling in their habitat, increased poaching, and battering winds from more intense hurricanes driven by climate change. That desperately needed help won’t come until the Fish and Wildlife Service actually makes a protection decision.”

“The ghost orchid is Florida’s favorite flower and has captivated people all over the world for generations. If the federal government does not take decisive action to protect the ghost orchid under the Endangered Species Act, and fast, we may lose this captivating species for good,” said Melissa Abdo, Ph.D., Sun Coast regional director for the National Parks Conservation Association. “That’s why it’s heartbreaking to see the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service violate the law and drag their feet on making a protection decision. Current protections afforded to ghost orchids at Big Cypress National

Preserve and other ghost orchid habitats are not enough to keep this species alive, full stop.”

“The ghost orchid cannot afford further delay,” said Jaclyn Lopez, director of the Jacobs Law Clinic for Democracy and the Environment at Stetson University College of Law. “Florida’s biodiversity faces so many threats — from climate change to sprawl pressure — the federal government needs to step up its game and prioritize protecting our vulnerable plants and animals.”

The orchid is one of the most famous flowers in Florida, but its population has declined by more than 90% globally. Only an estimated 1,500 ghost orchid plants remain in Florida, and less than half are known to be mature enough to reproduce. The Florida populations of ghost orchid have declined by up to 50%.

The ghost orchid is at risk of extinction from multiple threats, including poaching, habitat loss and degradation, and the climate crisis. Just last year two people were caught stealing a ghost orchid and other rare plants from Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. Meanwhile, in Big Cypress National Preserve, proposals to drill for oil and to expand off-road vehicle access threaten the ghost orchid’s sensitive habitat.

The ghost orchid’s current limited range includes the Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and additional conservation and tribal areas in Collier, Hendry and possibly Lee counties. It is also found in Cuba.

Following a [petition](#) filed by The Institute for Regional Conservation, the Center for Biological Diversity and the National Parks Conservation Association, the Fish and Wildlife Service [determined](#) that the rare native orchid may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. The agency initiated a status review to inform a final decision, which the agency was legally required to make in January.

The conservation groups are represented by the Jacobs Law Clinic for Democracy and the Environment at Stetson University College of Law.

A private non-profit organization, The Institute for Regional Conservation (IRC) is dedicated to the protection, restoration, and long-term management of biodiversity on a regional basis, and to the prevention of local extinctions of rare plants, animals and ecosystems. Based in Florida, USA, IRC works on conservation research and action throughout South Florida, the Caribbean and beyond. Its vision is to unite people and nature to restore our world.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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Since 1919, the nonpartisan National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice in safeguarding our national parks. NPCA and its more than 1.6 million members and supporters work together to protect and preserve our nation's most iconic and inspirational places for future generations. For more information, visit www.npca.org

Recognizing that the health of our environment and of our communities are inextricably linked, and entirely dependent on a functioning and just democracy, the [Jacobs Law Clinic](#) pursues and defends justice through advocacy focused on Florida's most pressing environmental issues.