

**Recommendation for the Designation of  
American Chaffseed  
*Schwalbea americana* L.  
as a Virginia Species of Greatest Conservation Need**

Contacts

Becky Gwynn, Deputy Director  
Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources  
[becky.gwynn@dwr.virginia.gov](mailto:becky.gwynn@dwr.virginia.gov)  
A 7870 Villa Park Drive, P.O. Box 90778, Henrico, VA 23228-0778  
(804) 593-2043

Jason Bulluck, Director  
Virginia Natural Heritage Program  
Department of Conservation and Recreation  
[jason.bulluck@dcr.virginia.gov](mailto:jason.bulluck@dcr.virginia.gov)  
600 East Main Street Richmond, Virginia 23219  
(804) 786-8377

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, with support from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation-Division of Natural Heritage, recommends the addition of American chaffseed (*Schwalbea americana* L.) to Virginia's list of Species of Greatest Conservation Need as a tier I-B species (Appendix 1).

Justification

Species Summary

*Schwalbea americana* (American chaffseed; G2/SH, Fed LE/State NL) (Appendix 2) was listed as Federally Endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in September 1992 due to extirpation of the species from over half of its historical range and a decline in known occurrences (USFWS, 1992). *Schwalbea americana* is ranked G2 (imperiled) by NatureServe and the Natural Heritage Network on a global scale and as the only member of its genus, it is particularly in need of conservation (NatureServe, 2022). This herb in the Broomrape family (Orobanchaceae) was once distributed broadly in the Eastern U.S. but currently only persists in half of the states where it existed. Historically, the species occurred in savannas and open pinelands of the Coastal Plain as well as at some inland sites. Most of the remaining populations are in areas that are still subject to frequent fire or right-of-way maintenance (USFWS, 1995; J. Townsend, pers. obs., December 15, 2022).

Trends

Two populations of American chaffseed were documented from sandy clearings in "pine and oak woods" in two counties of the Virginia Coastal Plain, but neither has been seen since 1938 (VA DCR, 2022). General inventory for rare Coastal Plain pineland species has been conducted for many years without the discovery of new *Schwalbea* populations, but suitable habitats do exist. These habitats occur almost entirely in rights-of-way where remnants of the Coastal Plain flora still thrive. Chaffseed could exist in low numbers or in a dormant state in such areas. Population

numbers are relatively higher in states south of Virginia, but these populations often have few individuals and declines in population size have been noted at many sites. Much of this species' habitat has been converted to other uses or is fire-suppressed (NatureServe, 2022). Without fire, open plant communities become denser and *Schwalbea* populations inevitably decline (USFWS, 2019). Modern trends in land use and fire management are directly responsible for the downward trend in population numbers and viability of the species range wide.

#### Conservation Action

The primary conservation action needed in Virginia is to continually search for new populations, particularly in areas managed with fire or in rights-of-way. Although numerous high-quality rare plant sites have already been discovered during right-of-way surveys, others likely exist and should be sought. Some conservation lands in the Coastal Plain are being managed in ways that would benefit *Schwalbea*, but the largest acreage of high-quality habitat exists in rights-of-way, which are managed by Dominion Power. A working relationship between DCR-DNH and Dominion has helped maintain quality rare plant habitat while minimizing the risks inherent to using herbicide for line maintenance.

Any efforts to manage early successional habitats for native species should be continued and expanded. These actions will benefit *Schwalbea* populations if they do exist and increase the likelihood of rediscovery.

#### Summary

*Schwalbea americana* (American chaffseed) is proposed for inclusion in the Virginia State Wildlife Action Plan as a tier I-B species due to its low number of historic element occurrences, specific habitat requirements, and need for management. Inventory focused on potential habitat is necessary to reestablish Virginia as part of its extant native range.

**This species is only found in the Crater Planning District Commission.**

## References

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