NEW ORLEANS — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing that more than 3 million acres of the state be designated "critical habitat" for the threatened Louisiana black bear.

It is estimated only 200 of the bears survive in the state. The areas that FWS wants designated as critical habitat are along the Tensas and Atchafalaya rivers and in wetlands of St. Mary and Iberia parishes.

The service will seek public comment on the proposal through March 2 before making a final decision. The designation would require federal agencies to ensure that any decision on projects or permits in those areas does not harm the habitat of the bears.

Such action could block some projects on private property. For instance, if a farmer wanted to turn bottomland hardwood forest that was designated as forested wetlands into new fields, he probably would have to apply for a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers.

The permit request would probably be turned down as detrimental to the bear's natural habitat, said FWS biologist Wendell Neal.

Some environmentalists say the critical habitat designation would be a significant step toward helping to increase Louisiana's black bear population.

Harold Schoeffer of New Iberia, conservation chairman of the Delta chapter of the Sierra Club, said the designation should have been made within six months after the bear was listed as threatened in February 1992.

David Pashley, biologist with the Nature Conservancy of Louisiana, said the designation reinforces a growing recognition that all three areas need to be protected from human encroachment.

But Pashley said the designation's real effect will be minimal, largely because of efforts by the independent Black Bear Conservation Committee to get forestry officials, farm-
The Nature Conservancy has worked for five years to get farmers in the Tensas basin to return marginal agricultural land to wetland uses.

Also, the Army Corps of Engineers expects to start this month signing agreements with the owners of 288,000 acres within the critical habitat area, allowing the federal government to limit development to fishing camps. The corps also plans to buy 50,000 acres of the most sensitive land.

Neal said research involving the bears’ threatened status indicates there may be more bears in the woods than previously believed, especially in northeastern Louisiana’s Tensas National Wildlife Refuge.

“It could be because it’s now a refuge, and maybe because they’re receiving greater scrutiny and protection,” Neal said.

“Or it may be that we’re finding out more about them. But whatever the reason, they’re in a little bit better shape than the service thought at one time.”