

Elusive salamanders may be in Watsonville

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

9-27-88

WATSONVILLE — The good news, according to city Planning Director Bud Carney, is that Big Foot probably doesn't live near Watsonville. The bad news is that the long-toed salamander might live in the wetlands around here, and therein lies the problem for city officials.

"While there's no evidence the long-toed salamander or Big Foot is in this area, we apparently have the kind of wetlands environment favorable to the salamander," said Carney. "So there's always the possibility it's there, I guess."

That possibility is at the heart of the brouhaha stirring between city and county officials who would like to clear the Pajaro River of heavy growth, and state Fish and Game and U.S. Wildlife representatives who want to protect the salamander and its

habitats.

The long-toed salamander is a federally protected, endangered species, whose prime habitat includes an area around Seascape and Rio del Mar. In the 1970s, the cause for the salamanders was carried to Congress, where legislation was passed to create a salamander preserve to protect the critters.

Now, Fish and Game officials are saying that salamanders could have inhabited the sloughs around Watsonville, although no one has seen one yet.

The potential salamander habitats could extend beyond the Pajaro River to three-fourths of the city, according to City Manager John Radin. He said Fish and Game officials want a salamander study done for all potential breeding sites in the city.

"That includes any development that comes in

along a potential wetlands, or within a mile of upper wetlands," he said. "That's anywhere from two to three or four square miles of the city. So where do you go to develop housing? Into the prime ag land? It's just a killer, and they're unbending."

Environmental studies can cost up to \$30,000 and more because there are only a few biologists with the expertise to study the long-toed salamander, Radin said.

The studies have to be geared around the elusive creature's appearances. Salamanders can only be found from November through March, and only at night, Radin said. If studies are required, then virtually all development within Watsonville could be held up at least a year by the salamander studies, Radin said.

Please see CRITTER — A14

Critter/ Brouhaha stirs between city, county

Continued from Page A1

So far, one development in the city has had to accommodate the salamander. Cashin/Ryan developers, who are planning to build an office complex at the corner of Airport Boulevard and Westgate Drive, had to install elaborate drainage devices because their project lies above a manmade pond which Fish and Game apparently believes could also be a favorable breeding ground for salamanders, according to Carney.

Besides the development problems, city officials are worried about the potential of the Pajaro River flooding.

"I'll try to protect the darn little things," said Mayor Betty Murphy. "But I also want to protect the people. I guess we won't need a bridge over the river; we'll be able to canoe over to Monterey County."

Since July, the city has been urging the Pajaro Valley Storm Drain Maintenance District, which is run by the county, to clear the river.

Assistant county Public Works

Director John Fanthom said, "It doesn't seem it's very likely" that the Pajaro River channel will be cleared before the winter rains come. Fish and Game has established a deadline of Oct. 15 for the river clearing to be completed, but it appears the agency wants to wait through the winter for a study of the salamanders. Salamanders only breed after the ground is soaked.

Fanthom said the river channel needs to be cleared for several miles, starting at Murphy's Crossing Road and extending to the rivermouth. It's undecided whether bulldozers will be allowed to pull out the heavy vegetation that's clogging much of the riverbed.

Fanthom said the county is waiting for the Army Corps of Engineers to meet with Fish and Game officials to decide what work can be done and whether a study of the salamanders is needed. "The levee is a federal project, but the corps doesn't want to proceed until they have the salamander issue behind them," Fanthom said.