

Rare salamander habitat protected

Endangered Species *RP 5-12-07*
55-acre parcel acquired by California for habitat restoration

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CORRALITOS — On a hilly 55-acre property covered with oak groves, meadows and ponds, one little amphibian is the star of the show.

The rural property, at the intersection of Calabasas, White and Gillette Roads, was recently acquired by the Cali-

fornia Department of Fish and Game with the help of San Francisco-based land conservation group The Trust for Public Land. It will expand areas protected for the endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, found only in three population pockets in southern Santa Cruz County and northern Monterey County. The salamanders are

considered the Central Coast's rarest native species.

According to Helen O'Shea, project manager for The Trust for Public Land, the property was vacant when the nonprofit approached landowners. At one time, apple orchards were on site and cattle roamed; rusty fences are still visible on the property. One small home

burned down about 30 years ago.

The parcel, between Highway 1 and Freedom Boulevard, was valued at \$1.9 million, but acquired for \$1.8 million by The Trust for Public Land in March. The Wildlife Conservation Board contributed \$1.55 million

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Courtesy Department of Fish and Game/Humboldt State University

A population of rare Santa Cruz long-toed salamanders (pictured here) found new state protection recently on a 55-acre property in Corralitos.

HABITAT

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and \$250,000 came from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Convincing landowners to part with property can be difficult, O'Shea said, but in this case it went fairly smoothly.

Landowner Patrick Cerrutti said he purchased the property in 2000 with the goal of building two or three homes. But when he discovered the land also housed a federal endangered species, engineering and environmental study costs soared to more than \$200,000. If he had known about the amphibians, Cerrutti said he would have thought twice about the purchase.

"We didn't buy the 55 acres to only live on a little plot," he said. "The protected species just drove the cost of building up."

Fed up with restrictions, Cerrutti told conservationists, "If this thing is so important, then you should buy it. I think the word got out."

When the Dept. of Fish and Game moves onto the property, it will be converted to a research and habitat protection area for long-toed salamanders and will offer opportunities for environmental education, although there will never be unfettered public ac-



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Helen O'Shea, program manager for The Trust of Public Land, visits a 55 acre parcel near Calabasas Road at White Road in Corralitos that was recently acquired by the Calif. Dept. of Fish and Game.



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

A small pond on the 55 acre parcel is home for the endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, found only in three population pockets in southern Santa Cruz County and northern Monterey County.

cess, O'Shea said.

According to Dave Johnston, an environmental scientist with the Dept. of Fish and Game, the likely first step will be to manage invasive, non-native species that threaten salamander habitats.

"I'd like to see some restoration of the various types of habitat," he said. "Ivy, eucalyptus and broom — those are the kinds of things that crowd out the native species."

Long-toed salamanders start as larvae in winter, then emerge from breeding ponds in late summer or fall. Johnston estimated that there are more than 100 adults in a dam known as Milsap Pond on the property and wildlife biologist Dana Bland, of Dana Bland and Associates, said she had tracked 89 juveniles and adults in a small uplands area on the property in the winter of 2004. After leaving the breeding pond, most salamanders move to nearby ground when the rainy season begins, although young salamanders travel further.

"Those guys just book," Johnston said. "Salamanders are just like people, it's the teens that do the traveling."

Adults, who grow to about

three inches, seem to prefer low-lying bushy plants in moist, shady spots where they can stay out of the sun and spend most of the year under fallen vegetation or the burrows of small mammals.

The 55-acre acquisition is important for the Dept. of Fish and Game because of its diverse, healthy habitats, the existing breeding pond and potential for new breeding areas, Johnston said. The decline in small farm ponds in Santa Cruz County may be partly to blame for dwindling numbers of long-toed salamanders, which have largely adapted to manmade ponds, he added.

But the main interest in the property is due to "location, location, location," Johnston said. Conversion to a protected area means salamanders can link up with several populations in breeding areas in the Larkin

Valley vicinity, some of about 15 sites found in southern Santa Cruz County.

"Ultimately, our goal will be to connect these populations," Johnston said.

"The subpopulation in Larkin Valley has a good chance of surviving," O'Shea added.

Although long-toed salamanders on the property have top billing, other finds include endangered red-legged frogs and rare native grasses called coastal terrace prairie, much of which have been destroyed by agriculture and development. Interesting finds come in unexpected places, such as a pile of eucalyptus bark perfect for the San Francisco dusky footed woodrat, a state species of special concern, O'Shea said.

"As we did more research here, we realized there was a lot more than meets the eye," O'Shea said.