

# Beetle moves closer to possible recognition

## Deal with activists puts federal study on the fast track

By BRIAN SEALS

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An obscure and colorful beetle's long and winding road toward federal protection took one more step Wednesday thanks to a tentative agreement between a coalition of environmental groups and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Ohlone tiger beetle, which is believed to live only in Santa Cruz County, was among the 29 species the federal government will expedite studies on to see if it warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Interior Department's negotiation averted a legal challenge from three conservation groups.

A final settlement must be approved by a federal judge acting on advice from Interior and Justice Department officials.

Though rare, the bug has become well known in the county. It spawned a lawsuit seeking federal protection and has been a factor in Palo Alto-based Keenan Land Co.'s efforts to build its Glenwood housing development in Scotts Valley. A proposed park expansion had to be shifted and a buffer zone designated between the park and the insect's habitat.

Scotts Valley planner Laura Kuhn said the city and the developer worked as if the beetle was an endangered species in the event it should be added to the endangered species list.

Should the beetle be listed, projects near beetle habitats would have to work around the insect's living space and take steps to protect the habitat, said Kieran Suckling of the Berkeley-based Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups involved in the agreement.

"Generally, the more endemic and the smaller a space, the more restrictive the regulations are," he said.

There are five populations of the beetle around Santa Cruz County, said biologist Grey Hayes, who petitioned to have the insect federally protected in 1997. He said the beetle has been found on the privately owned Younger Ranch and the adjacent Bombay property on

the west edge of Santa Cruz, Marshall Field on the UC Santa Cruz campus, near the Skyview Drive-In in Soquel and at the Glenwood project in Scotts Valley.

He said all of the locations are threatened by development.

Practical implications aside, environmentalists praised the agreement and the importance of the Ohlone tiger beetle.

"It's the most charismatic species in the agreement," Suckling said. "It's just one of the neat species in California."

The bugs are known for their metallic green, blue, red and yellow color, as well as their predatory prowess.

"Anything that crawls on the ground, it'll eat," Hayes said.

The insects can also grow to between 4 and 5 inches long.

The Ohlone tiger beetle was first found in the county in 1987 by county naturalist Randy Morgan. Subsequently, volunteers combed grasslands looking for the beetle's habitat. A bid to have the species federally protected in 1996 failed, but backers submitted new evidence in 1997.

Under the agreement announced Wednesday, the government agreed to speedily study

29 species. In return, the environmental groups agreed to allow the government to delay studies of eight other species. The money that would have been used on those eight will fund the studies on the 29 species during this fiscal year.

"This gives us the opportunity to act on those species," said Chris Tollefson, spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service. "In essence, we had no ability to address those species because we had no discretionary funds in the budget."

While the agreement still needs to be formalized, Suckling expects a decision on the 29 species in about six months.

Other species in California that were part of the agreement include the Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew, of which only 40 have been sighted, and Southern California's Mountain yellow-legged frog.

For more information, go to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Web site at <http://endangered.fws.gov> or to the Center for Biological Diversity's site at [www.sw-center.org/swcbd](http://www.sw-center.org/swcbd).

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