

FROG HABITAT PROPOSED

Endangered species 9.17.04
U.S. seeks protection for endangered amphibian

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SANTA CRUZ — Red-legged frogs, immortalized as Mark Twain's famous jumping amphibians of Calaveras County, may soon see about two-thirds of Santa Cruz County declared as their protected turf.

The designation would cover about 276,300 acres, including about 100,300 acres of privately owned land, from North Coast streams to Elkhorn Slough.

The county land is part of 5.4 million acres in 31 California counties that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed designating as "critical habitat" for the endangered frog. It means that even though the frog may not be on the acreage now, if the land has habitat features the frogs are drawn to, like wetlands, the designation would be triggered. In that case, projects that involve federal permits would have to be reviewed by wildlife officials for their possible impact on the frogs.

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Areas without essential elements for frog life, such as urban areas and shopping centers, are unaffected even though they may be designated as critical habitat, said Carl Bentz of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

"This is not a finely detailed map," said Carl Bentz of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"That would be very difficult to do."

Despite those assurances, some are skeptical, saying the designation would add one more layer of bureaucracy, which can be onerous for landowners.

"Because of the way people have been affected by other species, there's a fair amount of concern about how this might be implemented," said David Kranz, spokesman for the California Farm Bureau Federation. "It all depends on how it's implemented."

"We would hope instead of imposing programs

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and placing restrictions on land, that it would be voluntary," he said.

The critical habitat areas proposed in Santa Cruz County include coastal watersheds that drain into the Pacific Ocean in northern Santa Cruz County, and coastal drainages of southern Santa Cruz County including Aptos and Soquel creeks, and Elkhorn Slough in Monterey County and the watersheds that form its tributaries. Also included are the watersheds of the lower Pajaro River, including Sargent Creek, Corralitos Lagoon, Soda Lake and the mouth of the Pajaro River.

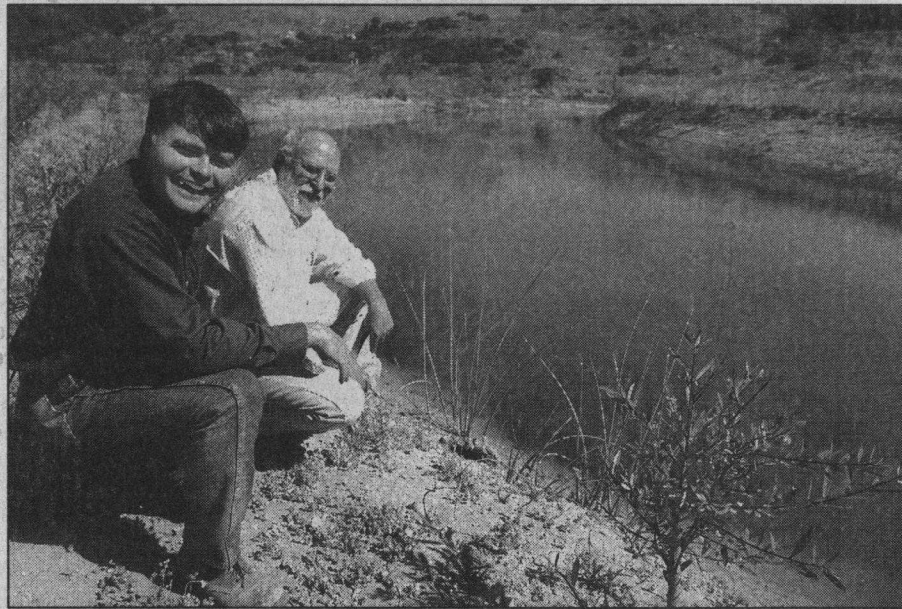
The designation of protected frog areas was triggered by a lawsuit filed by a coalition of environmental groups that claimed that, while the frog was listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1996, the federal government failed to protect habitat for them.

Federal officials said they felt it wasn't "prudent" to finger habitat on behalf of the frogs.

"Since California red-legged frogs are found on private property, we determined the frog was at risk from vandalism and that publication of specific localities would make the species more vulnerable to vandalism as well as collection for market consumption," wildlife officials said in the Federal Register.

Environmentalists countered that the federal agency has adopted a de facto policy of refusing to identify and protect habitat, not just for the red-legged frog, but for many listed species.

"The (Fish and Wildlife) Service had to be dragged kicking and screaming into court to make them take this step," said Jan Hasselman of the Earth Justice Legal Defense Fund. "The bot-



David McAuley and Jim West of Graniterock survey the frog habitat the company maintains at the Wilder Quarry north of Santa Cruz.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

tom line is that the red-legged frog is teetering on the brink of extinction. Without meaningful habitat protection, one of California's most charismatic critters might hop right into history."

According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife, activities that could be stopped or affected by adoption of the habitat zones include converting land to urban development or vineyards, the development of golf courses, RV parks, and intensive hiking, mountain-biking and horseback-riding trails.

Construction activities that would be affected include construction of storm-water basins and road building. Burning, cutting or mowing of wetlands or riparian vegetation, if done when red-legged frogs could be killed or injured, would be prohibited.

California's largest native frog, the red-legged's low staccato grunt used to

be heard from Marin County to Baja California, Mexico, and inland through the Central Valley.

The fat, athletic legs that propelled

the frog in Twain's story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," however, proved to be a liability for the species.

At the turn of the 20th century, the frogs were being killed at an estimated 80,000 a year and devoured for their meaty legs. At the same time, their Central Valley habitat was being transformed from a large wetland of marshes into an agricultural region.

Then the appetizing amphibians were hit again. After being eaten almost into oblivion, they were replaced with a tasty newcomer imported from the east — bullfrogs.

As time would tell, the bullfrogs were not only better adapted to the new farmlands, they had an enthusiastic appetite for the red-legged frogs.

Consequently, red-legged frogs have vanished from 70 percent of their range.

The species is believed to remain only in pockets in 240 streams in the coastal mountains of Central California.

Substantial numbers live at Elkhorn Slough, the Bonny Doon Quarry and the Granite Rock Co. quarry adjacent Wilder Ranch State Park.

The red-legged frog leaped into Gran-

iterock's corporate life several years ago when biologists, who found squished frogs on nearby Highway 1, speculated the frogs were living in old ponds on the quarry property.

As a condition of mining, Graniterock had to plan conservation measures for the frog, the first habitat conservation plan undertaken for the red-legged frog in the county.

The company has specially designed, dug and landscaped frog-friendly ponds to help the population leap back, said Jim West, Graniterock's director of government affairs. A pipeline under Highway 1 that once conveyed sand from the quarry to railroad cars is now a "frog freeway," an underground safe passage for the frogs, he said.

This year, a biologist working for Graniterock found evidence the red-legged frogs were breeding in the ponds, West said. "If they're breeding, you know the pond's a success."

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