

Feds aim to save SC salamander

Report notes amphibian's high potential for recovery

Endangered

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Species

725 OK

SANTA CRUZ — A new effort to save Santa Cruz's namesake amphibian is creeping along.

A revised protection plan aimed at saving the endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander has been issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The plan will serve as a blueprint for restoration efforts.

Researchers found the salamander's existence still threatened, but with a high potential for recovery. The service's goal is to reclassify the salamander from endangered to threatened and to remove it from the Endangered Species List. The recovery is expected to cost at least \$6.5 million, much of it spent on additional research identifying prime salamander habitat.



Long-toed salamander

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that it will cost at least \$6.5 million to save Santa Cruz's namesake endangered amphibian.

The salamander is 4- to 6-inches long with dull orange or metallic yellow spots on a dark body. It spends most of its life underground in small burrows and breeds in shallow ponds. Only three large major clusters of the salamanders are known to exist, all in coastal areas in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

The exact number is unknown because many of the areas have not been surveyed recently. In 1972, Ellicott Slough, which has the largest known population, was estimated to support 8,000 to 10,000 of the salamanders. Biologists believe that population has remained stable. Due to habitat decimation at Valencia Lagoon, however, almost no reproduction has taken place, and just one salamander egg and one larva were found there in 1997, down from thousands in the 1950s.

According to the draft recovery plan, the salamander's decline is due mainly to habitat loss to farmland, housing and roads.

"We do our best to get these action plans implemented, but it's guidance, not a law," said Grace McLaughlin, the Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who prepared the recovery plan.

The recently released draft plan is actually a second revision of the recovery report, McLaughlin said. The plan was approved by the service in 1977, with the first revision coming in 1985.

According to the plan, the salamander may be reclassified as threatened when breeding and habitats are maintained for a minimum of 20 years.

The plan calls for surveys to locate additional breeding sites and habitat areas, calculating where the salamanders are and how many exist, developing a clear management plan, and continued public education.

"The approach that is taken in this particular plan is substantially different than previous plans. We're looking at 10 additional breeding sites. Before we were only looking at two."

According to the plan, the actions taken to protect and restore Valencia Lagoon have not been sufficient. However, out of the other 11 known habitats, seven have been documented as capable of supporting breeding efforts.

The plan also found that further degradation of the breeding pond at the Ellicott site appears to have slowed because of the recovery actions taken.

The draft recovery plan is available to the public for review and comment until Sept. 7. Contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (805) 644-1766 for more information.