

Zayante grasshopper awarded protections

Animals
Settlement forces feds to designate areas as critical habitats, could affect quarries

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Along with a few other rare species, the grasshopper lives only in the sand parkland habitat found on ridges and hills in Ben Lomond, Zayante and Felton.

ZAYANTE — A lawsuit on behalf of a very rare grasshopper that lives only in the sandy soils around Zayante has been settled.

The settlement compels the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to designate habitat areas necessary for survival of the Zayante band-winged grasshopper.

"It probably won't affect a single homeowner," said Peter Galvin of the Center for Biological Diversity. "But any large development will likely face additional hurdles and possibly outright prohibitions if they're going to modify or destroy the habitat."

The decision could force another look at quarry operations that already have habitat conservation plans and protections in place for the grasshopper and other rare species, Galvin said.

"We expect those decisions would have to be revisited," he said.

The Berkeley-based Center for Biological Diversity and Christians Caring for Creation had filed suit in U.S. District Court in San Francisco to force the federal government to make the habitat designations for the Zayante grasshopper and six other endangered species.

The lawsuit charged that the Fish and Wildlife Service has systematically refused to designate critical habitat for more than 200 threatened and endangered species since September 1996.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Jane Hendron said a backlog of work delayed the designations.

"In terms of priority, it was felt we needed to get new species listed that are in desperate need of protection and then take care of the backlog," Hendron said.

The settlement requires habitat critical to the grasshopper be specified by July.

Once critical habitat is designated, no federal agency may grant a permit, authorize or commit money to any project that would "adversely modify" or destroy the habitat.

One of the smallest of grasshoppers, the Zayante band-winged is pale gray with a banded eye and dark crossbands on its forewings. It often alights on bare ground and is conspicuous in flight because of the color of the hind wings and a crackling sound.

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Along with a few other endemic and rare species, the grasshopper lives only in the sand parkland habitat found on ridges and hills in Ben Lomond, Zayante and Felton. Biologists refer to the sand parkland as a kind of Galapagos Islands, where species lived in isolation on inland sand outcroppings that are surrounded by vastly different ecosystems.

When it was listed as an endangered species in 1997, the grasshopper was known to live in only seven patches of the sand parkland, Galvin said.

The same sand parkland that's home to the grasshopper, however, is sought by quarry operators. More than 60 percent of the sand parkland is estimated to have been lost by sand mining, urban development, recreation and agriculture, Galvin said. An estimated 100 acres of the sand parkland remain, he said.

Corrections and clarifications

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