

Frog slows campground progress

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SANTA CRUZ — When state parks officials convene in Santa Cruz next week, they won't approve plans for the coast's largest recreational vehicle campground.

That was the original plan.

But rare red-legged frogs have delayed decisions on the proposed Wilder Ranch State Park campground by at least six months.

A decision on the environmental studies will be next spring, at the earliest, according to Roger Calloway, state parks planner.

The red-legged frog once was found throughout the lowland areas in most of the state. It now lives only in a few Central Coast locations, including Santa Cruz County.

It was proposed for the federal endangered species list two years ago and is still awaiting consideration.

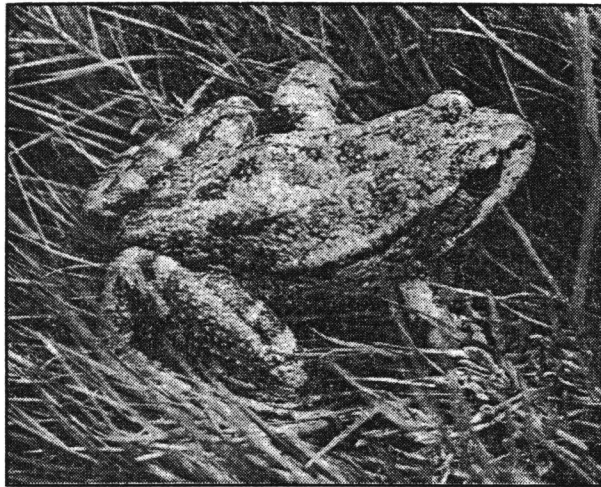
Scant attention was paid the lowly frog when Graniterock announced plans to convert its 300-acre sand quarry into a 380-campsite development.

Graniterock has proposed giving the land next to Wilder Ranch State Park to the state. The company would then lease back portions for mining and would operate the campground for 35 years.

An environmental impact report done for state parks noted the area had possible red-frog habitat, but said no frogs had been found.

Mike Westphal, a researcher with Coyote Creek Riparian Station, objected to that "glossing over" of the frogs. Westphal pointed out that he mapped a concentration of dead frogs along Highway 1 in front of Wilder Ranch State Park.

"This is of tremendous significance," he said. "In sheer number and in geographic location, this (population) may constitute the heart of what remains of this species."



Rare red-legged frogs were found near the proposed campground.

He warned that the increase in people, traffic, sewage and predators that would accompany the campground could diminish the remaining frog population by an estimated 10 percent.

State parks officials, in response, ordered more frog field work.

Sure enough, a frog was found in a reservoir that supplies water to the sand quarry, about a quarter-mile from the proposed campground, said Calloway.

"We're assuming now it's throughout the park," said Calloway.

"That means we make sure we take the necessary steps to protect frog habitat in the park."

Calloway said the campground will probably not be redesigned because of the frog. The amphibious critter

lives in ponds and drainages that are not part of the campground area, he said.

But it will mean rewriting and recirculating the environmental impact report.

Calloway said the state is treating the frogs as if they already were listed as endangered.

The California State Parks and Recreation Commission, a nine-member board appointed by Gov. Pete Wilson, was scheduled to meet Tuesday in Santa Cruz to certify the environmental impact report — which essentially means approving the plans.

Now, the meeting will be a "public forum" to allow residents a chance to air their opinions about the plans, said Calloway.

The environmental report won't be approved until next spring, said Calloway.

After that, the State Coastal Commission will consider the plans for approval.

The county Board of Supervisors may also get a say: attorneys are arguing whether the campground portion of the plan needs county approval, said Calloway.

Opponents of the park contend that the frog's belated jump into the process was a lucky leap, but is not the only reason the campground proposal should be dumped.

Increased traffic on Mission Street and Highway 1, water and sewage-disposal problems are reasons enough to kill the campground plans, according to Don Croll of Keep Wilder Wild.

"We're trying not to make a big deal of it and stick with the bigger issues," agreed Bruce Bratton, a member of the North Coast Beaches Advisory Committee. "If it's there, fine ... wonderful. But it's not a large part of our thing."

The State Parks and Recreation Commission will meet at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday, Oct. 24, at the Loudon Nelson Center, 301 Center St., Santa Cruz.