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Ban sought on pesticides harmful to frogs

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A conservation group wants to stop certain pesticides from being used in areas inhabited by rare red-legged frogs, including some agriculture-heavy parts of Santa Barbara County.

The Center for Biological Diversity has applied for a court order banning 66 pesticides that have been authorized for use in California. Among them are three of the five most used pesticides in Santa Barbara County -- 1,3-dichloropropene, chloropicrin and metam sodium, which are commonly used for fumigating strawberry fields -- according to 2004 figures from the California Department of Pesticide Regulation.

The center also wants consumers to be warned about the chemicals' possible effects on frogs, which biologists say are particularly sensitive to environmental changes and contamination. In recent years, some scientists have linked pesticides with a worldwide decline in amphibian populations.

The Center for Biological Diversity wants the pesticide ban enacted in and around the frogs' core habitat. It would be up to the judge to determine those areas, said Jeff Miller of the center, but the group wants the ban to cover core habitat identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a recovery plan prepared for the frogs. That core habitat covers the coastal

area of Santa Barbara County west of Goleta, a portion of the Santa Ynez Valley and part of the Santa Maria Valley.

If the ban were to be enacted in the Santa Maria Valley, "it would have quite an impact, primarily on our strawberry industry, I would imagine," said Joe Karl, deputy agricultural commissioner for the county.

The center filed a motion Monday asking for a ban and for the court to require the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to examine the effects of pesticides on the frogs, which are listed by the federal government as a threatened species. Mr. Miller said the center expects a ruling from the court within a few months.

Last year, in response to a lawsuit filed by the center in 2002, the court ruled that the EPA violated the Endangered Species Act by registering pesticides for use without properly considering their possible effects on red-legged frogs, and required the agency to consult the Fish and Wildlife Service about the issue.

The center now wants the court to set a three-year schedule for the EPA to do that, and in the meantime, to stop 66 pesticides from being used around the frog's strongholds.

Populations of the frog, which Mark Twain immortalized in "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," have plummeted in recent decades.

Mr. Miller said research in the Central Valley and Sierra Foothills found a correlation between pesticide drift and localized extinction of red-legged frogs.

The Center for Biological Diversity also wants the EPA to monitor pesticides in three of the frog habitats to determine if the buffer areas are protecting them; to inform consumers about the injunction; and to post point-of-sale notices warning consumers that pesticides may harm the frogs.