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## Deal reached to limit planting fish for sport

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Anglers may no longer be able to catch rainbow trout in many of California's mountain lakes, the result of an agreement reached Thursday to protect native fish.

The California Department of Fish and Game has agreed to cease stocking fish reared in hatcheries – including trout, bass and catfish – in many lakes and streams where the practice threatens 16 native fish and nine native frog species.

The deal was reached after weeks of negotiations with two environmental groups that sued the state over its hatchery and stocking practices. The interim rules are meant to protect native species while the state prepares a broader, permanent plan to reform its hatchery and stocking programs.

The agreement will have potentially far-reaching effects on sport fishing in the state.

Species targeted for protection range from Central California steelhead, found in the American River, to the California golden trout, found in lakes and rivers of the southern Sierra Nevada. Protected amphibians include the California red-legged frog and mountain yellow-legged frog.

Hatchery-reared fish have been planted by the state into lakes and streams for a century to support recreational fishing. But these fish compete with native species for food and habitat, and in some cases also prey on native fish and frogs or their young.

"Interim measures limiting stocking are needed to help save California's native fish and frogs from extinction," Noah Greenwald, program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement. "Fish and Game will still be able to stock hatchery fish, but mainly in places where they won't harm native species."

Greenwald's group and Pacific Rivers Council sued the state in Sacramento Superior Court in 2006 to force reform of its hatchery and stocking practices. The Department of Fish and Game is preparing an environmental impact report on the program but recently asked Judge Patrick Marlette for a one-year extension, until January 2010, to complete the study.

In response, environmental groups asked for interim measures to protect native species, resulting in the agreement announced Thursday.

Fish and Game officials had little to say about the deal, except to confirm its basic terms.

"Nothing is final until the judge certifies it on Monday," spokeswoman Jordan Traverso said.

Greenwald said the deal will take effect immediately if approved by the court. It was structured, he said, so that some stocking can continue in order to support the state's popular inland sport fishing industry.

He said the state will be allowed to continue stocking hatchery fish in reservoirs that have more

than 1,000 acres of surface area. That means popular fishing spots like Folsom Lake and Lake Oroville will probably continue to be stocked.

The American River also will not be immediately affected. Fish are not stocked directly in the river, though procedures at the state's Nimbus Hatchery, which produces most of the salmon found in the river, could be altered by the permanent changes being studied.

Stocking may also continue in smaller reservoirs if they are not connected to a stream that hosts any of the 25 native species. And Fish and Game will be allowed to renew existing permits for fish stocking on private land or backyard ponds.

But natural lakes and streams that are home to the native species will no longer be stocked. And new requests for private stocking permits must first prove that no native species are present.

Greenwald said Fish and Game has identified 81 water bodies where stocking will be halted. Another 112 also might be affected, and the state may be hoping for some leeway to continue stocking these waters. Neither list was available Thursday.

Mike Seefeldt, vice president of the Hot Creek Hatchery Foundation in Mono County, said the agreement could harm many small businesses that depend on fish stocking for a major portion of their tourism-related income.

"It's going to have a significant impact on Mono County and the people that run the resorts," said Seefeldt, who lives in Sacramento and is a retired Fish and Game hatchery manager. "A lot of them are only open in fishing season. If they're on a lake that's not stocked, they're probably going to be facing catastrophic financial impacts."

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