

Environment News Service

California Sued for Fish Stocking

SAN FRANCISCO, California, October 5, 2006 (ENS) - A lawsuit filed today by environmentalists challenges the California Department of Fish and Game for allegedly failing to consider the impacts of fish stocking on imperiled aquatic species.

"Numerous studies demonstrate that stocking introduced trout in California's lakes and rivers has serious impacts on native fish and amphibians and is contributing to a number of species' slide towards extinction," Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the plaintiffs in the suit. "Yet Fish and Game has never analyzed or mitigated the impacts of stocking on California's aquatic ecosystems or natural heritage."

The legal challenge was brought under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which requires the state agency to determine whether its fish stocking program has a significant effect on the environment and if so, prepare an environmental impact report.

The lawsuit seeks a moratorium on fish stocking where imperiled species occur until the department completes the required analysis under CEQA.

The agency can then use the analysis to determine where stocking may be appropriate and where it needs to be eliminated to avoid wildlife impacts.

"Indiscriminate fish stocking is continuing to harm California's native species and the web of life they depend on for survival," said Deanna Spooner, conservation director for Pacific Rivers Council, also a plaintiff in the case. "If Fish and Game doesn't take immediate steps to reform its stocking program, then imperiled species like the mountain yellow-legged frog may go extinct in my lifetime."

The groups submitted comments in August 2005 and again in July 2006 requesting that Fish and Game initiate environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

The comments included data showing that fish stocking in 2005 occurred in at least 47 water bodies where 36 imperiled species occur, including a number of federally listed threatened and endangered species.

Many scientists have documented the link between fish stocking and amphibian declines in remote, well-protected wilderness areas of the Sierra Nevada, including Dr. Vance Vredenburg of the University of California at Berkeley.

"This mountain range contains some of the largest tracts of roadless land in the lower 48 states, yet some amphibian species have disappeared in these seemingly pristine areas while other species occupying the same habitat remain abundant," Vredenburg said. "Introduced trout are a big factor in these declines."