

Christian Soldiers Marching Off to Save Endangered Toad Christian Group Joins Campaign to Save Toad

By Dennis Pfaff
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SAN FRANCISCO - The Bible hasn't been particularly kind to the image of amphibians.

In Exodus, for example, an infestation of frogs (by some accounts, toads) is one of God's ten plagues visited upon Egypt.

But now a religious environmental group, working with more secular organizations, wants to help some of the creatures get a better break, if not from the Almighty at least from the Bush administration.

Christians Caring for Creation, along with the Center for Biological Diversity and the Natural Resources Defense Council, last week announced a new legal effort to prod the federal government toward expanding the amount of land considered crucial to the survival of the endangered arroyo toad.

The toad, which was put on the Endangered Species List in 1994, has been bedeviling Southern California landowners and transportation interests for years. But environmentalists suggested there were higher values to consider.

"In the Bible, God's words are very clear concerning the creatures on this earth," Connie Hanson, director of the Christian group, said in a written statement last week. The group was founded in Los Angeles in the 1990s.

"He loves them," Hanson said. "They are good. They belong to him. And we, the people of this earth, are told to keep his creatures alive and thriving."

The organizations said Thursday they had notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that they intend to sue the agency over its designation of a mere 11,695 acres of "critical habitat" for the animal.

That is a drastic reduction from the more than 478,000 acres the government had proposed to designate in June 2000, near the end of the Clinton administration.

The figure has been whittled down over the years, partly as a result of legal challenges brought by housing developers and backers of an Orange County toll road project. In 2002, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia overturned a designation of more than 180,000 acres and ordered the government to try again.

Federal officials, in announcing the new critical habitat acreage in Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, cited economics for much of the reduction. They said an economic analysis of one proposal to designate about 95,000 acres would have cost nearly \$1.5 billion over 20 years, with much of the burden borne by private landowners.

Although a critical habitat designation does not create wildlife refuge or preserve, it can result in use restrictions on private land. Federal agencies, for example, are required to make sure that when they issue permits for activities in critical habitat areas the habitat isn't destroyed.

Critics said the new designation avoids the potential path of the Orange County toll road, which would run through toad habitat and wetlands at a state park, the San Onofre State Beach.

"It gives a free pass to developers and the toll road agency to go through the state park," said James Birkelund, an attorney for the NRDC in Santa Monica.

Don Reck, a deputy field supervisor for the wildlife service's Ventura field office, said the potential impact on the toll road was one of the economic concerns behind the reduction in the habitat designation. But he said there were other reasons, as well, including refinements to earlier assumptions made by the agency.

In its announcement in April, the wildlife service said the agency had eliminated "areas of marginal quality" that the toad would not likely use. In addition, it excluded some private land already covered by habitat conservation agreements, Indian lands and military installations.

Reck said the office had not seen the environmentalists' lawsuit notice.

Federal officials are allowed to take economic considerations into account when designating critical habitat.

"If the benefits of excluding an area outweigh the benefits of including it, the [Interior] secretary may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless this would result in the extinction of a threatened or endangered species," the wildlife service said in April.

But David Hogan, urban wildlands director for the Center for Biological Diversity, accused the government of employing a "totally bogus

process" to come up with its latest figure.

He said the government looked only at the potential economic harm from the designation and ignored any positives.

The toads, which measure only up to about three inches in length, prefer shallow, streamside pools and open, sandy stream terraces, according to the government. Hogan said protecting the toads' habitat would also have beneficial effects on water quality and help prevent flooding, all with beneficial economic impacts for humans.