

Amphibian not living fairy-tale life

STOCKTON - The California red-legged frog has had some rotten luck.

In the late 1800s, tens of thousands were scooped out of wetlands each year, their legs destined for dinner plates in San Francisco's finest restaurants.

This delicacy dwindled, so humans imported bullfrogs to satisfy their appetites. Those bullfrogs, released to the wild, promptly gobbled up many of their smaller red-legged cousins.

All the while, frog habitat crumbled as 90 percent of the Central Valley wetlands were diked and drained to make way for homes and crops.

Now the federal government is studying whether the threatened frog - believed to be the inspiration for Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" - has also suffered from the use of dozens of pesticides on farms and ranches.

In a legal settlement announced this week, the Environmental Protection Agency plans to study 66 pesticides for up to three years. Use of the pesticides will be banned in some frog habitat areas, at least until the study is complete.

"If we keep willy-nilly throwing these pesticides on amphibians without doing the studies first, it's just going to perpetually be in a state where the frog is suffering," said Brent Plater, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, a conservation group.

The center sued the EPA four years ago for failing to study the impact of pesticide use on the frog. A federal judge last year sided with the conservation group, ruling there was potential for the frog to be harmed.

In a statement, the EPA said the settlement "addresses the concerns of public interest groups while keeping pest control tools available for other stakeholders."

The temporary pesticide restrictions cover aquatic areas within the frog's federally designated critical habitat, consisting of 450,000 acres statewide. The frog has no critical habitat in San Joaquin or Calaveras counties.

However, the restrictions also include some areas outside of critical habitat where red-legged frogs are known to live.

One population of frogs has been documented on a ranch in Calaveras County, and the species also lives on the grounds of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, southwest of Tracy.

It was not clear Friday if the pesticide restrictions would apply to those two areas. While officials at the lab use chemicals to kill weeds, precautions are taken such as not spraying while the frogs are mating, a lab spokeswoman said.

Officials with the California Farm Bureau Federation said they are monitoring the settlement.

"I think there may be some impact (on farmers), but I'm not sure we have an opportunity yet to gauge what that impact would be," said federation spokesman Dave Kranz.

After the three-year study, the EPA could either lift the restrictions or keep them in place, depending on its

findings, said Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the diversity center.

In reality, only some of the pesticides in question may be endangering the frog, said Robert Stack, a biochemist who heads the Jumping Frog Research Institute in Angels Camp. Individual decisions should be made for each of the chemicals, Stack said.

"In my opinion, this was not an attempt to shut down all pesticide use," he said. "It was an effort to get the government to determine which are harming the frogs and which are not."

Amphibians like the red-legged frog are declining around the globe, conservationists say, blaming - at least in part - industrial chemicals and pesticides.

Some of the chemicals impair development and cause frog deformities, they say. Atrazine, one of the pesticides to be reviewed by EPA, has also been linked to prostate cancer in men and breast cancer in women.

The settlement, which still awaits final approval based on comments from the public, also requires the EPA to distribute brochures about pesticides and its possible effects on the frog.

Contact reporter Alex Breitler at (209) 546-8295 or abreitler@recordnet.com

