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Feds shrink acreage set aside for Calif. tiger salamander

by Terence Chea
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Federal wildlife officials said Tuesday they would cut by nearly half the amount of land set aside for the California tiger salamander, saying it would be too costly to restrict development in those areas to protect the threatened amphibian.

Home builders applauded the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to scale back the number of acres designated as the salamander's critical habitat, but environmentalists said it would hurt the species' recovery and accused the Bush administration of ignoring science to appease developers.

The California tiger salamander a yellow-and-black amphibian that lives in woodlands, grasslands and vernal pools has been at the center of a battle between environmentalists and developers over the federal Endangered Species Act and its impact on urban development from Fresno to Santa Rosa.

In its final rule published Tuesday, the Fish and Wildlife Service said it would set aside 199,000 acres in 19 counties as the salamander's critical habitat a designation that could prevent or force changes to development plans in 32 areas. The rule goes into effect in about 30 days.

But the service decided to drop an additional 184,000 acres in six counties that the agency initially

proposed as critical habitat in August 2004. The

12 dropped areas include some of the state's fastest-growing regions, including 66,000 acres in Alameda County, 43,000 acres in Contra Costa County and 28,000 acres in Monterey County.

Excluding those 12 areas would eliminate more than 80 percent of the estimated \$441 million in lost development opportunities over the next two decades that would result from setting aside all of the 383,000 acres originally proposed, said FWS spokesman Al Donner.

Developers were pleased by the agency's decision, saying it would help ease Northern California's housing shortage.

"Reserving acreage as critical habitat just makes it more daunting to build housing that's unaffordable," said Joseph Perkins, CEO of the Home Builders Association of Northern California. "Setting aside habitat is just the least efficient way to protect species."

But environmentalists said the new rule would hinder the recovery of the tiger salamander which has lost 75 percent of its original habitat and accelerate the loss of open space.

"The tiger salamander is in a desperate fight for survival," said Peter Galvin, conservation director for the Center for Biological Diversity. "The plight of California's natural

environment is mirrored by the plight of the salamander. As the salamander loses its habitat, so too does California lose its precious oak woodlands, grasslands and vernal pools."

Under the Endangered Species Act, the Fish and Wildlife Service is required to designate as critical habitat areas considered essential for a threatened or endangered species' recovery. Development can be restricted in those areas even if the species isn't found there.

While developers and federal wildlife officials believe that critical habitat designations do little to protect species, environmentalists say studies show that threatened or endangered species are more likely to recover with them.

Galvin said Tuesday's decision was part of a broader attack on the Endangered Species Act by the Bush administration.

"This is in keeping with a very disturbing trend of weakening protections for wildlife and environmental quality at the political level in Washington," Galvin said.

Last week, a federal judge in San Francisco overturned the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to downgrade protected status for the California tiger salamander in Santa Barbara and Sonoma counties.