

Critical habitat review applauded

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Federal wildlife officials are taking another look at whether politics played an improper role in determining critical habitat for the California red-legged frog — a review that could have a major impact on Monterey County development.

The move by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service about about habitat for the red-legged frog and habitat areas for seven other species protected by the Endangered Species Act drew plaudits from Monterey County environmentalists Monday.

"We share concerns that this might be just the tip of the iceberg," said Gillian Taylor of the Ventana chapter of the Sierra Club.

"That's a good sign," said David Dilworth, a Peninsula environmental activist and executive director of Helping Our Peninsula's Environment. "The decisions were not based on the science."

The red-legged frog, which was immortalized by Mark Twain in the short story "The Celebrated Jumping from Calaveras County," once flourished in much of California, from the Oregon border to Mexico.

But most of its historical habitat was lost, and today the Central Coast counties of Monterey, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara provide most of the streams and drainages where surviving red-legged frogs live.

In 2001, under pressure from environmentalists, the federal agency designated 4.1 million acres in California as critical habitat for the red-legged frog's recovery. The frog was declared threatened in 1996 under the Endangered Species Act.

Last year, the agency cited potential economic impacts and trimmed the proposed habitat for red-flagged frogs to about 450,000 acres. That came after the Homebuilders Association of Northern California had settled a lawsuit against the federal agency over the original habitat designation.

"It was one of the sweetest settlements the Bush administration did," said Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity in Portland, Ore. "It gave them exactly what they wanted."

But the federal wildlife agency announced Friday it would review that and other decisions made by Julie MacDonald, a Bush administration appointee who resigned her post under fire in May as a top Interior Department official. She was rebuked by the department's inspector general for pressuring scientists to change findings and for leaking information to industry officials.

"We're glad to see this reconsideration. It was definitely due," Greenwald said.

Greenwald estimated it will take at least a year for the Fish and Wildlife Service to complete its review of the habitat decisions. Besides the red-legged frog, other species under review include the Arroyo toad, Canada lynx, white-tailed prairie dog and Hawaiian picture-wing flies.

An agency spokeswoman said the review is a high priority project, but she couldn't say when it would be completed.

Depending on the eventual size of the frog's critical habitat in the county, the decision could "severely constrain what could be used for development," said Alana Knaster, deputy county resource director. "We'll have to wait and see."

Now there's little argument, Knaster said, where the federally protected critters are living in Monterey County.

"Most of our river basins are habitat," she said.

But the issue becomes more complex with small streams, seasonal wetlands and other areas that would be potential recovery habitat for the threatened frogs, she said. And that decision ultimately affects how property with designated habitat can be developed.

"It could (affect) some projects we haven't worked on yet," Knaster said.

But Paul Campos, general counsel of the homebuilders association, predicted the pending review of red-legged frog habitat won't greatly change the amount of acreage.

He said last year's sharp reduction of critical habitat for the frog resulted from a legitimate weighing of economic impacts, rather than political meddling.

