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More land for toad urged

Federal suit argues space set aside for endangered amphibian inadequate

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ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST - Two conservation groups filed a federal lawsuit Wednesday challenging the federal government's designation of 11,600 acres of protected habitat for the endangered arroyo toad, calling the land area inadequate.

The lawsuit, filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and Christians Caring for Creation, asks a judge to order the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to expand its designation of "critical" toad habitat, which was cut from 478,000 acres proposed in 2000 to 11,695 acres designated in April.

"The federal government has totally fallen down on the job and its obligation to protect the endangered arroyo toad in California streams and rivers," said David Hogan, the Center for Biological Diversity's urban wild lands director.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's 2001 designation of 182,360 acres of critical habitat was itself struck down by a federal judge, after it was challenged by the building industry.

The gravel-colored arroyo toad, or *bufo microscaphus californicus*, lives in rivers with shallow, gravelly pools next to sandy terraces. The adult toads burrow into the sand during the day and emerge at night to eat insects.

The toad has lost about 75 percent of its historical habitat because of urban development, recreation, dam construction and other human activities, officials said. It was placed on the federal list of endangered species in 1994.

When the latest habitat designation was made last April, environmental groups said it fell short of what the amphibian needs to avoid extinction. In some cases, acreage was reduced to exclude areas cut off from creeks by roads or railroad tracks and not likely to be used by the toad.

Other areas were deleted after Interior Secretary Gale Norton determined that protections, such as major alterations to projects or developments, would be too costly.

The final designation also eliminated military bases and some private lands protected by habitat-conservation plans.

In a study released in February, federal officials said a previous proposal to protect the toad on more than 95,000 acres could have cost more than \$1 billion over the next 20 years.

"They overemphasized speculative economic harm to development while totally disregarding the real economic benefits of habitat protection," Hogan said in an interview Wednesday.

In the Antelope Valley, 734 acres, all inside the Angeles National Forest, are

earmarked as critical habitat. The 2001 plan struck down by the judge earmarked 941 acres in the area.

Designated are a 4-mile section of Little Rock Creek from just north of the Little Sycamore campground to the upper end of the Little Rock Reservoir, plus a 1.1-mile stretch of Santiago Creek upstream from the reservoir's upper end.

In the Santa Clarita Valley, the April designation eliminated 7,398 acres proposed for critical-habitat designation along the Santa Clara River and San Francisquito Creek. A portion of the planned 21,000-unit housing development known as Newhall Ranch is in that area.