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New habitat for frog

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The red-legged frog could have a lot less land to call its own under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's plan to redraw the frog's "critical habitat" boundaries.

Critical habitat is required by the Endangered Species Act and outlines those places where a species can thrive. In April 2004, Fish and Wildlife named more than 4.1 million acres in California as critical habitat for the red-legged frog.

The new proposal would reduce that to less than 738,000 acres. Coastal regions like Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties have the most acreage set aside for the frog.

The habitat would be reduced considerably through the Diablo Range, though the plan would leave about 65,000 acres for frogs in Alameda County and 58,000 in Contra Costa County. San Joaquin County wouldn't have any critical habitat, and Stanislaus County would have only a couple of acres under the new design.

Fish and Wildlife figures that future developers would lose about \$497.6 million because of restrictions that come with critical habitat, which can require another level of review by federal regulators.

The proposed rules are certain to anger environmentalists, who insist that protected land is vital to recovery of the frog, which is listed as a threatened species under federal law.

"Ultimately, everyone is harmed because the species loses protection and everyone will be subjected to these restrictions for a long time," said Jeff Miller, Bay Area wildlands coordinator with the Center for Biological Diversity. "Once it recovers, the frog can coexist with people without worries of extinction."

Jim Nickles, spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Sacramento office, said the old boundaries were based on large watersheds and included places that didn't necessarily make ideal frog habitat.

"We tried to be a lot more precise and highlight areas where the frog needed to be accommodated and took out areas where it doesn't," he said.

The new proposal also reduces restrictions on ranches, where frogs often live in ponds created for cattle. Nickles added that Thursday's release of the new proposal is subject to public comment, with a final ruling likely to come in March.

"So if people have information on areas that should be included we need to get that information," he said.

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