

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

NOVEMBER 29, 2004

Protection sought for vernal pools

FRAGILE ECOSYSTEM: The plan targets more than 35,000 acres in western Riverside County

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The Press-Enterprise

Seeking to reverse the decline of a unique ecosystem, federal wildlife officials want landowners to voluntarily help protect vernal pools across California and southern Oregon.

A tentative plan issued Thursday seeks to protect the last remaining vernal pools, seasonal wetlands that fill up after rains and host scores of rare animals and plants. The plan is part of an emerging umbrella approach to preserving an entire ecosystem as opposed to one species, officials said.

"The habitat itself is so unique and so many species depend on it, and they are all in trouble, that the ecosystem approach is the only way to go," said Jim Nickles, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman.

The plan includes 35,454 acres in western Riverside County, the only place vernal pools exist in the Inland region, officials say. The best-known vernal pools are in the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve near Temecula.

On the west end of San Jacinto, the city has required developer KB Home to preserve a two-acre vernal pool complex off Warren Road where a 498-home project known as The Cove is planned, said Tim Hults, the city's community development director.

"It's going to be surrounded by a park and will be fenced and access restricted," Hults said.

Vernal pools are the home to the endangered Riverside fairy shrimp and threatened vernal pool fairy shrimp. Many species rely on the pools, officials say.

Vernal pools come to life when winter rains collect in shallow basins. In the spring, they are distinguished by concentric circles of wildflowers. In Riverside County, vernal pools harbor endangered Riverside fairy shrimp and threatened vernal pool fairy shrimp.

Some 75 percent of such pools have vanished amid urbanization agricultural uses, Nickles said.

The wildlife service's plan asks private landowners to help manage vernal pools and can help the agency direct federal funding to assist in protection and restoration. Nickles said it also will guide Riverside County as it puts into place a 75-year plan to protect endangered species while allowing development in the western part of the county.

Environmental groups welcomed the plan as a way to retain the last remnants of the region's natural heritage. However, some say the county's plan fails to protect one-third of the area's vernal pools.

"We've already lost so much," said Monica Bond, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity in Idyllwild. "Because they are in the lower elevations, they are particularly vulnerable to development."

Ron Rempel, general manager of the county's Regional Conservation Agency, said that while those pools may be lost, the plan was designed to protect the highest quality vernal pool habitat.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to hold workshops in the next four months as it seeks public comment on its plan, Nickles said.

Staff writer Gail Wesson contributed to this report.