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## 1.8 million acres proposed as critical habitat for red-legged frog

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WASHINGTON —The California red-legged frog regained political territory Tuesday as the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed designating 1.8 million acres in California as critical habitat for the threatened species.

The proposal spans 28 counties and more than triples the agency's previous critical habitat proposal. Fish and Wildlife Service officials also hope it quiets the long-running amphibian controversy, although that may be unlikely.

"The goal of the Service is to help recover this species, which is a California icon that Mark Twain first made famous in the days when early Californians hunted the frogs as a food delicacy," Mike Fris, the agency's Sacramento-based acting assistant regional director, said in a written statement.

The largest native frog in the Western United States, the California red-legged frog casts an equally outsized political shadow. The new critical habitat proposed Tuesday is the fourth revision in seven years. The last rewrite was retracted after federal investigators began examining former Deputy Assistant Interior Secretary Julie MacDonald.

Though avoiding her name, the Fish and Wildlife Service stated Tuesday that MacDonald "may have inappropriately influenced the extent and locations" of the frog's prior critical habitat proposal. The latest revisions largely pleased environmentalists, who along with Fish and Wildlife Service professionals had frequently clashed with MacDonald.

"No endangered species can survive without its habitat intact, and the red-legged frog desperately needs protection of adequate wetlands habitat throughout its former range," declared Jeff Miller, conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Critical habitat is the area considered essential to species recovery. It is not a reserve, nor is its land purchased by the government. If federal actions such as levee construction potentially threaten the species or its habitat, the agencies must consult on plans.

The latest critical habitat proposal grew, in part, because officials added land adjacent to known populations. Officials also lifted a previous restriction that kept

upland critical habitat to within several hundred feet of a water source.

Of the total, 1.2 million acres are privately owned and the rest is owned by state, federal or government agencies. This includes, for instance, portions of Vandenberg Air Force Base and the Army National Guard's Camp San Luis Obispo.

The specific 49 habitats range from a 4,449-acre parcel in northwestern Calaveras County to several hundred thousand acres in San Luis Obispo County. It excludes land in Merced, Fresno and Stanislaus counties that had originally been included.

Critics including Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, have suggested critical habitat designation effectively lowers property values because landowners feel more constrained. Fish and Wildlife Service officials said they avoid developed land where possible.

"I have reservations about the need for a listing," Cardoza said Tuesday, adding that "the process is broken, because they have had to go back and redo this a number of times."

Officials are still calculating the proposal's estimated cost.

The Fish and Wildlife Service initially proposed in 2001 a critical habitat covering 4.1 million acres. Ranchers, developers and San Joaquin Valley lawmakers erupted. The agency then scaled the proposal back to 737,912 acres. That didn't end the struggle.

In April 2006, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed 450,288 acres. A year later, officials backtracked and said they would try yet again because of MacDonald's apparent interference. MacDonald abruptly resigned in May 2007.

"MacDonald ... did not want to designate critical habitats," the Interior Department's Office of Inspector General reported last year, adding that MacDonald appeared "frustrated" by the critical habitat decisions.

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