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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

EPA to limit use of 66 pesticides while studying endangered frog

by CHUCK SQUATRIGLIA
Chronicle Staff Writer

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has agreed to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine whether 66 pesticides used in California harm the endangered California red-legged frog, and it will limit the use of those chemicals while it conducts that research.

The EPA's decision comes 13 months after a federal judge in San Francisco, ruling on a lawsuit filed by the environmental group Center for Biological Diversity, said the agency violated the Endangered Species Act by approving the pesticides without examining their impact on the amphibian Mark Twain made famous in "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

U.S. District Court Judge Jeffrey White ordered the EPA to perform such a review "at the earliest possible time."

The EPA and the Center for Biological Diversity reached a settlement this week that requires the EPA to complete its review within 36 months. During that time, the EPA will prohibit use of the chemicals within or adjacent to the animal's habitat.

California red-legged frog

This endangered frog lives near the sheltered backwaters of ponds, marshes, springs, streams and reservoirs.

Description: It's the largest native frog in the Western United States, ranging from 1.5 to 5.1 inches in length. The abdomen and hind legs of adults are largely red; the back has small black flecks and larger irregular dark blotches on a brown, gray, olive or reddish background color.

Habitat: Deep pools with dense stands of overhanging willows and a fringe of cattails are ideal.

Range: Historically, the frog was found throughout the Central Valley and Sierra foothills. California red-legged frogs are now known to live in 22 counties, primarily in the Bay Area and the Central Coast.

Threats: Overharvesting, habitat loss, nonnative species introduction and urban encroachment.

"This is a big settlement with some commonsense provisions," said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Miller said there is some evidence suggesting at least some of the 66 chemicals -- including diazinon, malathion and strychnine -- pose a threat to the frogs. Other studies have linked pesticides in general to a worldwide decline in amphibians, he said.

But there is no conclusive proof the chemicals in question have specifically harmed California's dwindling population of red-legged frogs, said Allan Noe, a spokesman

for CropLife America. The trade group represents 75 pesticide manufacturers and helped broker the settlement.

"There's never been any claim that frogs have been harmed," Noe said.

The California red-legged frog, named for the color of its lower abdomen and the underside of its rear legs, was once abundant throughout the state but has vanished from 70 percent of its historic range, Miller said. It is now found primarily within the Bay Area and along the Central Coast, he said.