

## **Salamander Gets a Home in SBC**

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By Luke Roney/Staff Writer

Hollister - Federal wildlife officials set aside more than 24,000 acres of private land in San Benito County for the threatened California tiger salamander last month, a move that may affect how the property can be developed.

On Aug. 23, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced that it was setting aside 24,308 acres in San Benito County as critical habitat for the salamander, which the agency listed as a threatened species last summer. Previously, the salamander had no designated critical habitat in the state. A critical habitat designation does not affect private ownership or preclude development on land. But if a federal agency undertakes, funds or grants a permit for development or other activities in a critical habitat, that agency must consult with the Wildlife Service to ensure that the plans don't harm the habitat.

The California tiger salamander - a yellow-and-black amphibian that lives in woodlands, grasslands and vernal pools - has been at the center of a battle between environmentalists and developers over the federal Endangered Species Act and its impact on urban development from Fresno to Santa Rosa.

"Certainly, from a development perspective it is a cause for concern if you're in a critical habitat designation," said Raymond Becker, the local representative for Arizona-based DMB Associates, which is looking to build a new town on land in northern San Benito County. The DMB project, El Rancho San Benito, is not located in the newly created critical habitat.

San Benito County Agricultural Commissioner Paul Matulich said that the designation could be a hassle for property owners who want to develop their land, but it wouldn't necessarily stop them from doing so.

The push to designate critical habitat for the salamander was made by the Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based organization with an office in the bay area.

"Critical habitat goes beyond protection of a species," said Jeff Miller, a wildlife advocate in the center's San Francisco office. Designating land as critical habitat allows a threatened species to recover by ensuring that its natural habitat remains intact, he said.

According to Miller, studies performed by his organization show that threatened species that gain critical habitat are twice as likely to recover as species that don't.

San Juan Bautista resident Rebecca McGovern, who has long been concerned with environmental issues, was pleased by the news of the designation of critical habitat in the county.

"I think it's absolutely essential. We can't just destroy everything," she said. "You can't kill off all those little creatures."

In all, the Wildlife Service said it would set aside 199,000 acres in 19 counties as the salamander's critical habitat. But the service decided to drop an additional 184,000 acres in six counties that the agency initially proposed as critical habitat in August 2004.

The 12 dropped areas include some of the state's fastest-growing regions, including 66,000 acres in Alameda County, 43,000 acres in Contra Costa County and 28,000 acres in Monterey County.

Although the salamander has been at the center of a battle between environmentalists and developers since it was listed as a threatened species last summer by the FWS, it traditionally has been a small issue for development in San Benito County, according to Senior County Planner Mary Paxton.

"It's come up with projects," Paxton said.

Developers are required to perform environmental surveys to determine if the salamander lives in the area of a proposed development. If it is found to be in the area, steps must be taken to protect it, Paxton said.

For example, environmental surveys for a subdivision on Santa Ana and Fairview roads found the presence of the tiger salamander. Developers were required to include a certain amount of open space in the subdivision to accommodate the salamanders' habitat, she said. Recently, a subdivision on Thomas Road in Hollister was put on hold after the owner of an adjacent piece of property found a tiger salamander in his pool.

Developers were pleased by the agency's decision to reduce the proposed acreage designated as critical habitat for the salamander, saying it would help ease Northern California's housing shortage.

"Reserving acreage as critical habitat just makes it more daunting to build housing that's affordable," said Joseph Perkins, CEO of the Home Builders Association of Northern California. "Setting aside habitat is just the least efficient way to protect species."

But environmentalists said the new rule would hinder the recovery of the tiger salamander - which has lost 75 percent of its original habitat - and accelerate the loss of open space.

"The tiger salamander is in a desperate fight for survival," said Peter Galvin, conservation director for the Center for Biological Diversity. "The plight of California's natural environment is mirrored by the plight of the salamander. As the salamander loses its habitat, so too does California lose its precious oak woodlands, grasslands and vernal pools."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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