

Salamander plan appears unlikely to move forward

By Jeff Quackenbush
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SONOMA COUNTY – After seven years of work, the Santa Rosa Plain Conservation Strategy, the first attempt of its kind in the nation at “cooperative conservation” of an endangered species, including the California tiger salamander, may itself be in danger of extinction.

The prime reason behind its downfall is that local governments responsible for implementing the strategy to balance development and preservation say they are too cash-strapped to front the more than \$400,000 in environmental studies needed before local officials and federal and state regulators can adopt the needed experimental framework.

On May 13, the Santa Rosa City Council, whose jurisdiction includes much of the 75,000 acres of projected central Sonoma County salamander habitat, decided not to fund the studies and put the implementation effort into hibernation.

Officials said both a lack of funds and a cooling of government support for local conservation strategies in response to legal action were behind their decision.

“We had some guarantee that the federal government would be nodding its head with this,” Vice Mayor John Sawyer told his fellow

councilmembers at the meeting. “There were assurances along the way that this type of MOA would be possible. Those assurances have been taken away.”

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors is set to consider a similar recommendation at its meeting Tuesday.

“Without the dollars there to move forward, at this point we’re kind of dead in the water,” West County Supervisor and implementation committee member Mike Reilly said last week.

Although officials would have preferred to have a defensible and complete local conservation plan, they at least have some interim guidelines to work with.

“Folks are going to have to work with the interim guidelines, which are manageable,” Mr. Reilly said.

Having those guidelines makes the conservation strategy a much better outcome from the failed Santa Rosa Plain vernal pools plan during the 1990s, Mr. Reilly noted.

The guidelines were developed in 2006 by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, state Department of Fish & Game and five other state and federal agencies to allow a host of housing and other projects stalled since the emergency listing of the salamander

in 2001 and the formal listing in 2003.

Instead of having to conduct two-year surveys for salamanders on a project site in its central Sonoma County habitat, a project proponent could choose to mitigate for any disturbances of habitat by purchasing credits from a mitigation banker. The amount of mitigation depended on how far a project was from a vernal pool known for salamander breeding.

The complex concept behind the strategy was a formal agreement between the regulators and the local governments ensuring that species habitat is set aside.

The Endangered Species Act calls for the designation of critical habitat and creation of a regional habitat conservation plan, the latter of which can take several years to complete because of the in-depth environmental studies needed. Yet the work on the conservation strategy could serve that purpose, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

One of the problems with the strategy and implementation from the beginning was the involvement of the agricultural community, according to farming groups and other members of the implementation committee. Agricultural activities such as planting, replanting and crop conversion were mentioned in

the strategy as a matter to work out during implementation.

Problem was, that never got worked out satisfactorily, according to Bob Anderson of United Winegrowers for Sonoma County and Lex McCorvey of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau.

The trouble was farmland without seasonal pools to trigger Corps jurisdiction could still be viable habitat for salamanders migrating up to 1.3 miles from the pools to upland burrows. Also of concern was whether salamander conservation projects on farmland would increase the need to mitigate for salamanders attracted to new habitat.

The solution floated to the agricultural community was a habitat conservation plan to give farmers certainty of what they can do with their land. "The fear of the HCP is that you would have to go through two to three years of consultations for a change from one crop to another," Mr. McCorvey said.

So, agriculture and Santa Rosa, which has public works projects in salamander habitat, have been pursuing safe-harbor agreements with the regulators. That allows a property owner and potentially neighbors that preserve and enhance species habitat to not be held liable if extra

conservation efforts aren't able to be maintained, but it does not cover crop conversions, according to wildlife service spokesman Al Donner.

Also on the horizon is a threatened lawsuit from the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued the wildlife service to list the salamander. As part of a lawsuit against the Department of the Interior last year, the nonprofit group called the service's suspension of declaring critical habitat while the conservation strategy was being completed "illegal."