



STATES NEWS SERVICE

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Service designates critical habitat for California Tiger Salamander in Santa Barbara County

The following information was released by the Department of the Interior: In response to a lawsuit, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced it has designated 11,180 acres as critical habitat for the Federally threatened California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*) in Santa Barbara County.

Most of the critical habitat acreage is privately-owned, although small amounts of land are owned by Santa Barbara County. In this final action, the Service excluded 2,740 acres from the 13,920 acres that were proposed as critical habitat in January 2004 because landowners worked cooperatively to develop conservation strategies protecting the salamander and its habitat. More precise mapping also reduced acreage from the original proposal.

Our work with landowners has helped to conserve habitat for this rare amphibian, and we're looking forward to continuing these cooperative relationships," said Diane Noda, field supervisor for the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office.

This critical habitat designation was completed in response to a lawsuit filed by the Environmental Defense Center and the Center for Biological Diversity.

The California tiger salamander is large, stocky and terrestrial. It has

small eyes and a broad, rounded snout. The California tiger salamander inhabits low-elevation vernal pools and seasonal ponds and associated grassland, oak savannah, and coastal scrub plant communities of the Santa Maria, Los Alamos, and Santa Rita valleys in northwestern Santa Barbara County. Although California tiger salamanders are adapted to natural vernal pools and ponds, they now frequently use ephemeral and permanent ponds, including stock ponds. California tiger salamanders spend the majority of their lives in upland habitats in the burrows of California ground squirrels and Botta's pocket gophers.

The Santa Barbara County Distinct Population Segment (DPS) was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 2000. In August 2004, the Service listed the central population as threatened, re-evaluated the Santa Barbara County and Sonoma County populations, removed these populations as separate DPS and as a result listed the entire California tiger salamander species as threatened. The primary threats to the species are habitat loss and predation by non-native species.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the

conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is

provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife management areas.

A copy of the critical habitat rule can be downloaded from: <http://ventura.fws.gov/>

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.