

Salamander given new protections in county

By ANNA DAVISON

August 20, 2005 12:00 AM

NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Local environmentalists cheer as judge declares amphibian endangered here, in Sonoma

A federal judge on Friday declared the Santa Barbara County population of the California tiger salamander an endangered species -- reversing a decision made last year by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to reclassify it to the less dire status of threatened.

Karen Kraus, an attorney for the Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center, which brought the lawsuit with the Tucson, Ariz.-based [Center for Biological Diversity](#), said, "I hope at this point the service will focus on recovering the species ... rather than just shuffling things around on paper."

The elusive salamander has already provoked considerable controversy among folks who live where the salamander can be seen in the Santa Maria, Los Alamos and the Purisima and Santa Rita areas.

"There's a lot of strong feelings on both sides," said Gary Rice, general manager of the Santa Maria Airport, which reached an agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service over development plans for its land, where salamanders are found. "The only people that are winning on this are the lawyers," he added.

While representatives of the Fish and Wildlife Service wouldn't comment on the ruling or say whether the agency planned to appeal, spokesman Jim Nickles said, "Protections in place for an endangered species are a little more restrictive than a threatened species."

He added that "most rules apply to both."

One of the reasons, though, that the agency reclassified the Santa Barbara County and Sonoma County populations of the salamander as threatened last year was to offer a special exemption for ranchers, who officials say provide valuable habitat for the creatures. It meant that routine ranching activities were exempt from any additional regulation.

It was not clear Friday what influence the ruling -- from a judge in San Francisco -- will have on that approach.

"The practical effect of all of this is to return the status quo in Santa Barbara County to what it was," Ms. Kraus said. "It is frustrating that basically the outcome of the lawsuit is that they (the Fish and Wildlife Service) shouldn't have done what they did in the first place."

UCSB biologist Sam Sweet, who has spent decades studying the creatures, said, "That whole downlisting proposal was done with no evidence to support it at all."

He and Ms. Kraus described it as a purely political move.

While few people have seen the amphibians, which spend most of their lives hunkered in burrows borrowed from small mammals, the controversy over protections for the creatures saw them achieve bumper-sticker status in the North County, with some drivers proclaiming salamander "the other white meat."

The Santa Barbara County population of salamanders was given an emergency listing as an endangered species in 2000.

Mr. Sweet said it's difficult to estimate how many of the animals live in the county, but it's probably in the low thousands.

Biologists say the main reason for the salamander's decline is that much of its habitat -- breeding ponds and adjacent land -- has been lost to urban development or as ranches have been converted to vineyards.