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California tiger salamander to get critical habitat

By Louis Sahagun

Among the creatures circling the drain toward extinction in California is a black salamander with yellow spots that figured in the downfall of a Bush administration official who oversaw the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species program.

The California tiger salamander is back in the news, two years after Julie MacDonald, a former Interior Department deputy assistant secretary, resigned amid allegations of unethical and illegal activities.

In response to a lawsuit brought by the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has agreed to reconsider critical habitat for the dwindling Sonoma County population of *Ambystoma californiense*.

Under MacDonald's oversight, proposed critical habitat for the species was cut from 74,000 acres to zero.

Noah Greenwald, the center's biodiversity program director, said, "The designation of zero acres of critical habitat for the salamander was characteristic of the Bush administration's total disregard for the law and the nation's wildlife."

An inspector general's report released in 2007 came to a similar conclusion. MacDonald, it said, had pressured staff members to combine three different populations of the salamander into one, which downlisted its status from endangered to threatened.

The change was overturned by a federal judge who said the decision was made "without even a semblance of agency reasoning."

The center's lawsuit on behalf of the salamander is part of a larger effort to reverse what it calls politically tainted decisions concerning endangered species. So far, the center has challenged decisions denying listing or adequate critical habitat for 45 species in 28 states.

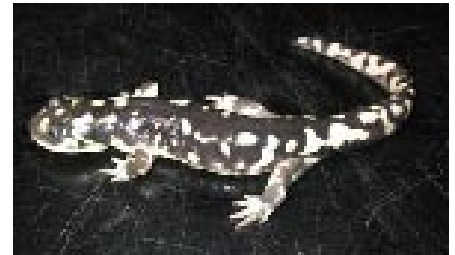


Photo: California tiger salamander.
Credit: Sam Sweet

But time is running out for the increasingly isolated populations of California tiger salamander, whose wetlands and vernal pools are being gobbled up by sprawl and expanding vineyard and row crop agriculture.

In Sonoma County, "this animal is in considerable trouble," said Sam Sweet, a professor of biology at UC Santa Barbara. "It lives in a series of wetlands that are almost completely enclosed by development and crisscrossed by roads."

"It will make it, if we give it a chance," he added. "But it is often hard to give creatures like this one a chance because a lot of these listings and critical habitat considerations are given at the eleventh hour-plus."