

Trout stocking target of lawsuit

BY CHARLES F. BOSTWICK, Staff Writer

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ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST - An environmental organization whose lawsuits have changed government policies on endangered species is challenging trout stocking in four mountain streams in Angeles National Forest.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit against the California Department of Fish and Game demanding a moratorium on trout stocking and an environmental study on stocking's effect on rare frogs, toads and fish in Bouquet Creek, Big Tujunga Creek, the San Gabriel River's west fork and upper Piru Creek.

"The purpose of the lawsuit is not to stop all trout stocking. Some trout stocking is OK," said David Hogan, director of the center's Urban Wildland Programs. "The major problems are stocked trout are preying directly on endangered native species, including the eggs or young. They also compete for food and space in streams where they are stocked."

The lawsuit, filed Thursday in Sacramento Superior Court, demands a moratorium on stocking fish where endangered or other rare species occur until state wildlife officials conduct a study under California's Environmental Quality Act.

Statewide in 2005, the center says, trout were planted in 47 streams, rivers and lakes containing 36 "imperiled" species, including ones designed by the federal government as threatened or endangered.

The center said those included an endangered 2-inch long fish called the unarmored threespine stickleback in Bouquet Creek and Big Tujunga Creek, an endangered amphibian called the arroyo toad in Piru and Big Tujunga creeks, and surviving native rainbow trout and southern steelhead in Big Tujunga, Piru and the San Gabriel River's west fork.

State wildlife officials had no immediate comment on the lawsuit.

Department of Fish and Game spokesman Patrick Foy said the department has hired biologists for several years to study whether planted trout harm endangered native species. The department has curtailed planting trout by airplane in isolated Sierra Nevada lakes, Foy said.

State legislation that took effect this year orders the department to step up trout stocking, assigning the state's trout hatchery program one-third of the fees from the approximately 2million California fishing licenses sold annually.

Last fiscal year, state hatcheries raised and planted about 12million trout, state records show. The legislation orders the wildlife officials to plant about 22million in 2009.

As a result of the legislation, state wildlife officials say they will hire consultants to prepare an environmental report, at a cost estimated about \$1million, describing the impacts of trout stocking. The report is scheduled to be finished in July 2008.

With offices around the western United States and in Washington D.C., the Center for Biological Diversity says it combines science, advocacy and legal action and claims a 90percent success rate in the courts.

