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SACRAMENTO – The California Department of Fish and Game must review whether its annual practice of adding millions of hatchery-raised trout to the state's rivers and lakes has contributed to declines in native fish and frogs, a judge ruled Thursday.

Sacramento County Superior Court Judge Patrick Marlette said the state's trout stocking program fails to meet environmental laws designed to protect threatened and endangered species, although he declined to temporarily shut it down.

“The fish stocking program has been in existence for over a century and, it appears, already has caused significant environmental impacts,” Marlette wrote in a five-page opinion. “Where impacts are significant but not final or irreversible, stopping the program now will not change that.”

Marlette's ruling requires the department to complete an environmental impact report, which will evaluate how the addition of trout affects native species. Department spokesman Steve Martarano said work on the report is already under way.

The decision was a partial victory for environmental groups who have long complained that trout stocking has led to a population drop in sensitive species, including the mountain yellow-legged frog, Cascades frog, California golden trout, McCloud River redband trout and Santa Ana sucker.

Noah Greenwald, a conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said an environmental review could reduce how many trout are placed in the state's rivers and lakes each year.

“Trout is a predator and it has a cascading effect on everything trout eat,” said Greenwald, whose organization along with the Pacific Rivers Council sued the state last October.

The department had argued fish stocking was exempt from environmental review because the program, which the department took over in 1945, was in place long before environmental laws protecting sensitive species were enacted in 1970.

Nevertheless, the department last year began an environmental review of the program, which produced 3.2 million pounds of trout in hatcheries around the state in 2006.

The state plans to stock the state's rivers and lakes with 4.5 million pounds of trout this year, Martarano said.