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Wildlife officials' habitat proposal moves district's boundary south into Petaluma

By Martin Espinoza
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Federal wildlife officials have expanded the portion of Sonoma County in which development projects might have to consider impacts on the threatened California tiger salamander, moving the district south to include a section of Petaluma.

The habitat proposal, published today in the Federal Register, defines the outermost boundaries of the salamander's range, aiding local efforts to identify what land will ultimately be needed to preserve the creature.

The area, bounded on the north by Windsor Creek, east by Sonoma County foothills, and west by Laguna de Santa Rosa, will likely exclude many urban and developed areas once it's approved, according to Al Donner, assistant field supervisor for Fish and Wildlife's Sacramento office.

The action is the latest step in efforts to save the tiger salamander while trying to preserve land and development rights.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service imposed emergency protections for California tiger salamanders in Sonoma County in 2002 under the federal Endangered Species Act. When the agency downgraded the classification from "endangered" to "threatened," it prompted a lawsuit that was partially settled when the wildlife service agreed to identify

salamander habitat before December 2005.

With the preliminary boundaries now in place, federal wildlife officials have scheduled a public hearing to discuss what land within the boundaries will be needed to preserve the salamander while allowing development. The meeting is Sept. 8 at the Flamingo Hotel in Santa Rosa.

"Our hope is that all people will stay engaged in the process and come up with a good conservation strategy," said Donner.

The Santa Rosa Plain Conservation Strategy Team, a broad-based coalition of federal and state regulators, local government officials, landowners, developers and environmentalists, is heading that effort.

Mike Kerns, a Sonoma County supervisor representing the southern part of the county, said expanding the boundary south surprised him.

"This is the first time that I had ever heard that it even historically existed south of Pepper Road, which up to this point has been the cutoff point or the boundary for any proposed designation."

Today's habitat proposal begins to satisfy the terms of a legal settlement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Center for Biological Di-

versity.

Last October, the Tucson-based environmental group sued the wildlife agency over its plan to save the salamander. Identifying a habitat by December is one of the conditions of a partial settlement of that suit.

Attorneys for the Center for Biological Diversity are scheduled to appear Thursday afternoon in U.S. District Court in San Francisco to argue another element of the suit. The environmental group wants the wildlife agency to reverse its down-listing of the species.