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1.6 million acres in 27 California counties set aside as frog habitat

Two previous efforts to set aside a protected area for the red-legged frog were thwarted.

By Julie Cart

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Tuesday designated

1.6 million acres in California as critical habitat for the endangered red-legged frog, made famous by Mark Twain in his story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

The amphibian that once was so populous that it was commonly featured on restaurant menus eventually became endangered because of development encroaching on its habitat and the effects of pesticides and other chemicals.

The habitat area is divided into 50 units across 27 California counties, including six counties that previously did not have designated critical habitat: Mendocino, Sonoma, Placer, Calaveras, Stanislaus and Kings.

It was the third time the agency has attempted to assign a protected area for the frog. Prior efforts were thwarted, first in 2001 by a lawsuit from the building industry, which objected to setting aside 4.1 million acres for frog habitat. Most recently, the agency reduced critical habitat to 450,000 acres in a

controversial 2006 decision by Interior Department official Julie MacDonald, who was found to have provided internal documents to lobbyists and pressured scientists to alter their conclusions. MacDonald later resigned.

Noah Greenwald, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued over the original habitat

decision, said the decision was a "step in the right direction" and noted that protecting California red-legged frogs has the benefit of protecting the greater ecosystem.

"Red-legged frogs are a strong indicator for clean flowing water and wetlands," Greenwald said. "As we've lost wetland habitats and as we've polluted water, we've lost this species. That has consequences for all of us."

Tuesday's decision includes a provision formulated in 2006 that exempts ranchers and farmers from violations of the Endangered Species Act if their activities unintentionally harm protected frogs. The rule was crafted to credit private landowners for any benefit they provide for the frog, such as providing habitat in livestock ponds.

The Fish and Wildlife Service estimated the 20-year economic impact of the habitat designation to be \$159 million to \$500 million, with about 90 percent of the impacts on new development. Another \$48.4 million of the cost is projected crop loss.

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A California red-legged frog. (Brian Vander Brug / Los Angeles Times)

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