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REGION: Lawsuit threatened over endangered amphibians

BY JANET ZIMMERMAN
STAFF WRITER

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An environmental group filed a notice today, Nov. 14, that it will sue the federal government for failing to develop a recovery plan for the endangered mountain yellow-legged frog, a species once plentiful in the San Jacinto Mountains.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy mandates that a recovery plan — detailing such steps as habitat restoration and removal of predators necessary to bring a species back from near-extinction — be in place within 2 1/2 years of a species being listed under the Endangered Species Act. The frog was listed in 2002.

Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney and biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said a recovery plan “would make the difference between life and death for these extremely rare frogs.”

The notice of intent to sue is required 60 days before filing



ADAM BACKLIN, USGS/CONTRIBUTED IMAGE

The endangered mountain yellow-legged frog was once plentiful in the San Jacinto Mountains

a lawsuit against the federal government.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a similar notice in 2011 to win recovery plans for the mountain yellow-legged frog and the California tiger salamander. No action was taken on the frog, but the center sued over the salamander and settled with Fish and Wildlife, which came

up with a recovery plan.

Jane Hendron, spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service, could not immediately be reached for comment.

After the similar notice in 2011, Hendron said Fish and Wildlife had worked with other agencies to improve prospects for the frog through captive breeding, limiting

recreation that harms habitat and clearing non-native trout from streams.

But the agency has a limited budget and time and first must meet court-ordered deadlines on numerous lawsuits over endangered species listings before it can move on to developing recovery plans, she said at the time.

Mountain-yellow legged frogs were once common in the streams of the San Jacinto, San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountains. Their population in the wild has dwindled to about 200, largely because of drought, predation by non-native fish, disease, contaminants and elevated levels of ultraviolet radiation.

The San Diego Zoo's Institute for Conservation Research has been breeding the frogs in its laboratory since shortly after they were captured from a drying stream in 2006.

In June, scientists released 100 juvenile froglets into a stream at the James San Jacinto Mountains Reserve near Idyllwild and a nearby stream on U.S. Forest Service land. About 20 of the amphibians were fitted with radio belts to track their

movements for up to 30 days after their release.

All of the frogs with transmitters stayed in the stream, as researchers had hoped, said Adam Backlin, an ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey who has worked on the project. They were visually monitored until a few weeks ago, when the frogs began hibernating.

"The big test is the winter. In the wild, that's when we lose a lot of animals. We hope they survive until next spring," Backlin said.