



Calif. public comments divided on federal protection for mountain amphibians

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WASHINGTON — A federal proposal to protect the Yosemite toad and other amphibians divides Californians, according to participants in a public comment period that conservative lawmakers now hope to extend.

It's a high-stakes debate, touching on more than 1.5 million acres spanning the length of the Sierra Nevada, and it has incited remarkably divergent opinions

In the comment period now scheduled to close Monday, a few have cheered the Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to protect the Yosemite toad, Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog and mountain yellow-legged frog. (Read the proposal and learn how to comment on it [here](#).)

"I am in full support," stated Jill Paydon, a resident of Big Pine in Inyo County.

"Hiking may be suitable for this habitat, but other human intrusion is inappropriate and unnecessary."

Many others have jeered or fretted.

"We know ... that our way of life is threatened," declared Linda Arcularius, chairperson of the Inyo County Board of Supervisors. "We have lived through the continual degradation of the access to the lands that have traditionally sustained us, and this proposal with others is significant and upsetting."

And some, with special clout, want the Monday deadline extended by another three months so the opposition can grow.

Instead of rushing ... we ask the Service to carefully evaluate the protections these species receive under existing law while affording local communities the necessary time to properly examine and comment on this proposal," eight House

Republicans wrote on Wednesday.

The GOP lawmakers include several in key leadership positions, including House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, as well as Reps. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, Devin Nunes, R-Visalia and David Valadao, R-Hanford, among others.

The hubbub is over a long-simmering proposal to protect the three amphibian species under the Endangered Species Act.

Following years of study and litigation, federal officials also propose about 1.1 million acres as critical habitat for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog, about 304,000 acres as critical habitat for the Yosemite toad, and about 221,000 acres in Fresno and Tulare counties as critical habitat for the mountain yellow-legged frog.

The Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog is presently

in danger of extinction throughout its entire range, based on the immediacy, severity and scope of the threats to its continued existence,” Fish and Wildlife Service officials warned earlier this year.

Officials sounded similar warnings about the Yosemite toad and mountain yellow-legged frog, and environmental groups including the Center for Biological Diversity have been petitioning to protect the species for more than a decade.

The amphibians need to be near bodies of water, though some can also really scoot around.

Scientists, for instance, report that mountain yellow-legged frogs have been tracked traveling as much as 145 miles during a five-day period.

Some areas proposed as critical habitat are already under state or federal control, including the sprawling Emigrant Wilderness in Mono and Tuolumne counties and chunks of Yosemite National Park.

Critical habitat is the territory considered “essential to the conservation of the species” that’s protected under federal law. It does not directly affect land ownership or establish a refuge or preserve, and does not require private landowners to undertake special restoration or recovery measures.

Still, nearly all of the 200-plus public comments received as of Friday were critical of the Fish and Wildlife Service proposal. Some show duplicate wording, while others are quite pointed.

“The continued radicalism of environmental issues has got to stop,” Chico resident Kevin Sevier declared, while Prather resident Kerri Neufeld stated Friday that “protecting frogs is not helping the people of the state.”