



## Endangered species listing for Sierra Nevada frogs sparks controversy

Matthew Renda  
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TAHOE NATIONAL FOREST, Calif. — The listing of three amphibians native to the Sierra Nevada has spurred a range of reactions, with wildlife advocates celebrating the decision and others expressing dismay.

Officials upset with the listing say it will have an undue detrimental impact on the regional economies, while ultimately failing to address the underlying cause for the population decline.

On April 25, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to grant protection under the federal Endangered Species Act to two distinct species of Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frogs and the Yosemite toad.

"We have determined that both the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog ... and the mountain yellow-legged frog are presently in danger of extinction throughout their entire ranges, based on the immediacy, severity and scope

of the threats to their continued existence," said the final ruling issued by the USFWS.

"These include habitat degradation and fragmentation, predation and disease, climate change, inadequate regulatory protections and the interaction of these various stressors impacting small remnant populations."

The April decision was prompted by the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the nation's foremost wildlife advocacy groups. The center initially petitioned the USFWS on behalf of the frog species in 2000 and followed up on behalf of the toad species in 2002.

"Yellow-legged frogs and Yosemite toads have suffered massive declines in recent decades and disappeared from most of the places where they once lived," said Collette Adkins Giese, a center biologist and lawyer who specializes in protecting amphibians and reptiles. "The Endangered Species Act has a nearly perfect record of stopping animals from going extinct — it's hands-down our best tool for saving these rare amphibians."

While the center is exuberant over the listing, several grassroots organizations and regional political representatives fret that the decision could present onerous restrictions on human activity within the nearly 2 million-acre swath of land that has been designated as critical habitat for the species.

Traditional economic activities such as grazing, timber extraction, mining and water diversion projects could be suspended or constrained as a result of the listing, said Kirk MacKenzie, who runs an organization called Defend Rural America.

U.S. Congressman Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, Calif., agrees.

"It could be detrimental to the types of industry that needs to be happening anyway," LaMalfa said, saying activities like cattle grazing on federal land actually have a positive land management impact by curtailing forest fuels.

LaMalfa said the listing may impact federal land management agencies, such as the Bureau of Land Management or the United States Forest Service and their ability to conduct forest thinning projects that have been proven to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland fire.

"The listing went ahead without taking all that into account," he said.

Furthermore, LaMalfa said, recreational activities such as fishing, backpacking, horseback riding, mountain biking and others could also be restricted in areas of the critical habitat, which include large portions of the Tahoe National Forest and the popular Desolation Wilderness area outside South Lake Tahoe.

Michael Woodbridge, spokesman for the Tahoe National Forest, said the specific impacts to the forest service-managed lands are being "sorted out" at the regional office.

"Our representatives are in Vallejo working with the Fish and Wildlife Service in an attempt to know better what is going to be affected," Woodbridge said.

If and when restrictions are put in place, they will not be effective until June 30 at the earliest.

"I intend to have input on the rule-making side of this process," LaMalfa said.

While factors behind the decision to list the endangered amphibians include habitat degradation and the practice of stocking lakes with non-native sport fish such as bass, which prey on the frogs and their offspring, LaMalfa said the most important factor in the population decline is the chytrid fungus.

Chytridiomycosis is an infection disease affecting amphibian populations worldwide and is thought to have originated in Queensland, Australia. The virulent disease can be fatal and is responsible for decimating amphibian populations in Australia, Central America, South America and the American West.

LaMalfa said it is this disease that has led to population decline and not human-related impacts, and as such, it will be of little utility to restrict access, recreation and industry in the areas designated as critical habitat.

The USFWS bases its decision to list a species on any of five factors that include the presence of disease or predation; destruction, modification or curtailment of habitat or range; overuse for reasons, commercial, scientific or recreation; inadequate regulations; and other man-made or natural factors.