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WILDLIFE:

Plan to save endangered frog hopping along

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Federal agency will detail actions by December 2018 to benefit mountain yellow-legged frogs, once plentiful around Idyllwild.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed Wednesday as part of a lawsuit settlement to establish a recovery plan for the endangered mountain yellow-legged frog.

The agreement is the latest development in an ongoing dispute between the agency and the Center for Biological Diversity over protections for the frog.

The amphibians that were once common in Southern California's mountain streams are now barely surviving in nine small populations in the San Jacinto, San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountains, according to a Fish and Wildlife review of the species in 2012.



The mountain yellow-legged frog is part of a captive breeding program through the San Diego Zoo's Institute for Conservation Research to bring it back from near extinction.
COURTESY OF ADAM BACKLIN, USGS

The Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, sued the government in February for failing to develop the recovery plan in a timely manner after the species was listed as endangered in 2002.

A recovery plan identifies actions necessary to save endangered species, such as habitat restoration and reintroduction of the species into the wild. Species with

dedicated recovery plans are significantly more likely to be improving than species without plans, said Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney and biologist with the center.

"Recovery plans really need to be developed soon after species are protected, because they give us a road map of exactly what we need to do to ensure those species won't go extinct," she said.

A Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman, Jane Hendron, said lack of a recovery plan has not stopped the agency from moving forward with recovery actions.

Fish and Wildlife has partnered with zoos and other government agencies on improving the species' survival, she said.

For example, 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 the San Jacinto Mountains in 2006.

Juvenile froglets and tadpoles have been released into a stream at the James San Jacinto Mountains Reserve near Idyllwild and a nearby stream on U.S. Forest Service land.

Also, Access to Williamson Rock, a popular climbing area in the Angeles National Forest, was closed because the trail impacted a stream occupied by the frog; it may be re-routed by the Forest Service, Hendron said.

"It's a misnomer, that absent a recovery plan nothing's being done or with a recovery plan everything will be done," she said. "A recovery plan doesn't require anybody to actually undertake any actions. It's voluntary."