

Press Democrat

Feds say \$385 million needed to save California tiger salamander, endangered plants on Santa Rosa Plain

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT |
June 21, 2016

A federal plan for preserving the endangered California tiger salamander and three wildflower species calls for the purchase of 15,000 acres of land in the Santa Rosa Plain for an estimated \$385 million over the next 50 years.

The 144-page plan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is not legally binding on any public or private landowners, but serves as a road map for recovery of the black-and-yellow amphibian that has frustrated Sonoma County builders and piled millions of dollars onto the cost of major developments, like the expansion of runways at the Charles M. Schulz-Sonoma County Airport.

But biologists are committed to saving the seldom-seen salamanders that have lost more than 80 percent of their habitat, primarily because of urban growth that has intensified over the past 20 years, according to the federal blueprint.



“With a recovery plan we can fight threats like habitat destruction that have pushed these salamanders to the brink of extinction,” said Jenny Loda, a biologist and attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, the conservation group whose lawsuit in 2012 prompted work on the plan released Monday by the federal wildlife agency.

The federal document aims to bolster three endangered flowering plants — Sonoma sunshine, Burke’s goldfields and Sebastopol meadowfoam — that grow only in seasonal wetlands.

The size of the salamander population is difficult to estimate, given the animal’s reclusive habits, but its historic range in Sonoma County of about 100,000 acres has been pared to about 20,000 acres of “fragmented habitat,” the plan said.

Tiger salamanders inhabit the Santa Rosa Plain, a narrow band of land from Cotati to Windsor, with a concentration of the amphibians between southwest Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park.

“They are in trouble,” said Josh Hull, a recovery division chief for Fish and Wildlife. The species’ endangered classification means they are “likely to become extinct in the foreseeable future.”

The salamander, which spends 90 percent of its life hidden in upland gopher burrows, emerges for nighttime migration to wetlands, where the amphibians lay eggs in vernal pools during wet weather.

Salamanders travel up to 1.5 miles between their upland burrows and the wetlands, Loda said. Vineyard expansion has cut into their upland habitat, where the amphibians, up to 9 inches long, take refuge underground from sun and wind that could kill them, the plan said.

With the recovery blueprint in place, Hull said he sees “quite a bit of reason for optimism,” even though no federal funding is attached to the plan.

The cost of buying easements to prevent development or outright purchasing 15,000 acres of land is estimated at \$380 million for salamander recovery, with an additional \$5 million for the three plant species between now and the target date of 2065.

The wildlife agency’s next step, Hull said, is formation of a team of stakeholders — construction industry, agriculture and conservation groups, nonprofits, and city and county officials — to identify properties and line up

funding for land acquisition.

“Now we get to the exciting point, which is working with people to implement the plan,” he said.

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District will use the plan to assess future land purchases, said Misti Arias, acquisition program manager. The district, which reaps about \$20 million a year from a voter-approved quarter-cent sales tax, has spent \$302 million to protect 111,000 acres countywide in the past 25 years.

Nearly 4,500 acres of protected land are within the Fish and Wildlife Service’s tiger salamander critical habitat area, a relatively small slice of the county, she said.

Without a designated funding source, the recovery plan’s \$385 million target is “pretty ambitious,” Arias said.

County land-use planning won’t change much with the recovery plan in place, said Tennis Wick, director of the Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department.

Planners already review development projects on designated salamander habitat, assuring that the developer has either purchased land to offset the loss of habitat or credits from a mitigation bank approved by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Wick said.

Mitigation credits, which can run as high as \$200,000, have forestalled some development projects, he said. The cost can be far higher for a project that involves relocation of an observed salamander population, triggering an extensive environmental review.

Buying mitigation credits accounted for nearly 40 percent of the \$53 million expansion cost for two runways at the county airport. The project covered 20 acres and was completed in 2014, said Jon Stout, the airport manager.

The \$20 million expense for environmental mitigation included \$3 million in credits for the salamander and \$13 million for Burke's goldfields, with all the credits based on land in the Santa Rosa Plain, he said. Fortunately for the county, federal grants covered 90 percent of the mitigation cost, Stout said.

In 2014, Santa Rosa agreed to spend nearly \$770,000 on mitigation credits aimed at preserving 9 acres of salamander habitat, a requirement for three long-planned city projects: the restoration of lower Colgan Creek, the Bayer Neighborhood Park and Garden and a manure management project at Beretta Dairy.

Loda, the biologist, said that spending millions to save a salamander is worthwhile in its own right, but also serves a broader purpose. There are other plants and animals in wetlands, and "they all play a role in the ecosystem," she said.

The investment also "supports the idea of preserving open spaces and keeping our water clean," Loda said.