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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Spells Out Ways To Save California Tiger Salamander

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Recovery plan calls for purchasing or protecting 34,000 acres in Santa Barbara County for endangered amphibian

A roadmap for boosting the number of California tiger salamanders in Santa Barbara County calls for taking several steps, including purchasing and protecting 34,000 acres deemed critical for their survival.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service recently released its final recovery plan to steer efforts geared toward protecting the distinct population of California tiger salamanders, which were listed as endangered in Santa Barbara County.

"We're committed to working alongside landowners to recover California tiger salamanders in Santa Barbara County, while supporting working lands that

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service recently released its final recovery plan to steer efforts geared toward protecting the distinct population of California tiger salamanders in Santa Barbara County. (Copyrighted photo courtesy of Adam G. Clause)

are the pillars of the local community and economy," said Steve Henry, field supervisor of the service's Ventura office.

"This recovery plan outlines how we can continue to work together to move toward recovery, with the ultimate goal of removal from the endangered species list," Henry said.

The Center for Biological Diversity had pushed for a plan to help guide recovery efforts.

"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. "This plan gives us hope for one of our most imperiled salamanders."

An amphibian, the California tiger salamander is a large, stocky, terrestrial salamander with a broad, rounded snout. Adults are black with white and yellowish markings, and can range from 6 to 10.5 inches in length.

While they live in burrows such as those made by squirrels and gophers, tiger salamanders surface during the rainy season for breeding. Salamanders travel to ponds where they stay anywhere from a few days to up to a month to breed.

Santa Barbara County's California tiger salamanders were listed as endangered in 2000 under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Loss of habitat — blamed on urban growth and intensive agricultural uses — is considered one of the biggest threats to the amphibian.

Most of the local tiger salamanders live on private lands, with six distinct metapopulations or groups of local populations or breeding sites, in the Santa Maria, Lompoc and Los Alamos valleys.

Those areas are west Santa Maria/Orcutt, east Santa Maria, west Los Alamos/Careaga, east Los Alamos, Purisima and Santa Rita.

Specifically, the recovery plan's first action item calls for protecting more than 5,000 acres around breeding ponds and nearby land through purchases and easements at the six areas.

Fish & Wildlife officials note several conservation tools exist for landowners to support recovery of the species. One is the Conservation Banking program, which permanently protects lands deemed valuable for a species.

Others are Safe Harbor Agreements, and voluntary easements through the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund.

But the plan also calls for restoring breeding habitats, as well as assessing and reducing risks of non-native predators, death via vehicle, hybridization with non-native tiger salamanders, contaminants and disease.

"Without adequate habitat protections, these salamanders can't migrate safely between their wetland and upland homes," Loda said. "I hope the habitat protections and other actions identified in this plan will be put in place right away to help move these salamanders toward recovery."

If steps are taken quickly and effectively, recovery criteria could be met by approximately 2045, federal officials said, estimating the cost of recovery could top $181 million.

The final recovery plan comes at a time when funding for endangered species is 3.5 percent of the total needed, according to an analysis by the Center for Biological Diversity.