

# Federal agency sued over salamander

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SAN ANDREAS - The Center for Biological Diversity this week filed a lawsuit to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to come up with a plan for the recovery of the California tiger salamander.

If successful, the lawsuit would force the creation of a plan similar to one that's been in effect since 2002 for the California red-legged frog. Such plans commit federal officials to work to protect and improve existing habitat for the plant or animal involved, and in some cases such as the red-legged frog, to seek to re-introduce the species to areas where it formerly lived.

Populations of the California tiger salamander living in eastern San Joaquin County and the adjacent foothills are listed under federal law as threatened with extinction. The federal government uses the more serious endangered listing for the California tiger salamander population in Sonoma County.

Federal law requires federal wildlife agencies to come up with recovery plans once species are listed as threatened or endangered but does not set any timeline for completing that work.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Sacramento office spokeswoman Sarah Swenty on Thursday declined to discuss the lawsuit or to answer questions about why there is no recovery plan for the frog.

Swenty did say, however, that her agency is not neglecting the salamander.

"We are working to protect the species in the absence of a recovery plan," Swenty said.

Recovery plans are a way for federal game agencies to help troubled species rebound. If successful, that makes it possible for the government to "de-list" the species and lift restrictions that in some cases may prevent or increase the cost of development projects.

In the case of the red-legged frog, the recovery plan calls for improvements that could lead to de-listing as early as 2025.

Swenty said that in the case of the California tiger salamander, there are a variety of habitat conservation plans hosted by local agencies that are seeking to protect habitat or at least to mitigate its loss. San Joaquin County, for example, has a multispecies habitat conservation plan that covers the salamander as well as a number of other species. The plan allows developers to pay money when they destroy habitat. That money, in turn, is used to permanently preserve habitat elsewhere.

Some California tiger salamander habitat, however, is not covered by any habitat conservation plan, including a 3,128-acre area of critical habitat for the salamander in western Calaveras County near Warren Road and Highway 26. Calaveras County has no habitat conservation plan.

Although Swenty declined to answer questions about why there is no recovery plan yet for the salamander, the Center for Biological Diversity noted that the rate at which the federal government completes such plans has been dropping steadily since the Clinton administration.

According to the center, during the Clinton years, the federal government completed an average of 75 such recovery plans per year. That rate dropped to 18 plans per year during the George W. Bush administration and only seven plans per year so far during the Obama administration.

According to the Center, almost 20 percent of the species protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act do not have recovery plans.

"It's troubling to see this backlog of recovery plans that imperiled species depend on to survive and thrive," Center for Biological Diversity staff attorney Collette Adkins Giese said.

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