

Lawsuit settlement forces recovery plan for tiger salamander

California tiger salamanders



GERALD AND BUFF CORSI/California Academy of Sciences

- **Appearance:** Large, stocky, terrestrial salamander with small eyes and a broad, rounded snout.
- **Habitat:** California vernal pools and other seasonal ponds, as well as grasslands and oak savannas from sea level to about 1,500 feet.
- **Range:** In the Central Valley, the salamander has been found from Yolo County to northwestern Kern County and northern Tulare County.
- **Life history:** The salamanders spend much of their lives in the burrows of ground squirrels and pocket gophers.
- **Breeding:** Only a few animals survive from the 400 to 1,300 eggs a female lays per breeding season.
- **Threats:** Non-native species have preyed on the salamander, but a bigger threat is habitat loss. The species requires vernal pools, grasslands and oak woodlands.

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Center for Biological Diversity

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SAN ANDREAS - The Center for Biological Diversity on Friday announced it has settled a lawsuit it filed in April to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to come up with a recovery plan for the California tiger salamander.

Under the settlement, the Wildlife Service has to come up with a recovery plan by 2017 for the Central California population of the salamander, which is in eastern San Joaquin County and the nearby foothills as well as other sites in inland California.

The Central California salamanders are listed as threatened with extinction under the federal Endangered Species Act. They are one of three such populations in California. The Sonoma and Santa Barbara populations are

listed as endangered under the act, which means they are more likely to soon disappear.

"Exotic predators and habitat destruction are pushing California tiger salamanders to the brink of extinction," said Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. "Recovery plans developed under this agreement will make sure that we're doing everything we can to ensure these salamanders don't vanish."

Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Michael Woodbridge confirmed that the agency has agreed to complete the recovery plans. He said a judge's decision confirming the settlement was filed Dec. 11.

Recovery plans detail habitat restoration and research necessary to help an endangered plant or animal bounce back to a sustainable population level. In some cases, such as with the California red-legged frog, the plans call for federal officials to seek reintroduction of the species in areas where it once lived.

Environmentalists have become concerned in recent years about a growing backlog of species listed as threatened or endangered for which no recovery plan exists. They point out that species with active recovery plans are more likely to be on the rebound.

Ultimately, the goal of such plans is to end the need for the species to be listed as endangered or threatened.

The settlement announced Friday calls for plans for the Sonoma and Santa Barbara salamander populations to be completed first.

Woodbridge said it is too early to tell what measures might be included in the plan for the salamanders living in the foothills and the Central Valley. He said property owners and others in the region would help to craft the plan. "They are stakeholders, and they should be part of the process. Property owners, local governments; other people that have a stake in it basically."

San Joaquin County is among the jurisdictions that already have systems in place to conserve habitat for rare, threatened and endangered species. Under San Joaquin County's Habitat Conservation Plan, a developer whose project would destroy salamander habitat would pay money to preserve habitat elsewhere.

Neighboring Calaveras County, in contrast, does not have a habitat conservation plan. But Calaveras does have several areas designated as critical habitat for the salamander, including 3,128 acres near Warren Road and Highway 26.

The lack of a habitat plan means that property owners who want to develop land where a protected species is present may have to individually conduct studies and come up with ways to mitigate the loss of habitat.

Adkins Giese said species recovery plans can sometimes spur new funding for research. She also tried to reassure property rights advocates who fear their interests are at odds with those of the salamander.

"Landowners are wrong to believe that recovery of these salamanders would prohibit development," she wrote. "Instead, they should embrace the opportunity to help bring the salamanders back from the brink of extinction. We have a chance to save this species, unlike other parts of our natural heritage that have been lost forever and cannot be brought back."

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