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News Release



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Breakthrough Strategy Unveiled for Voluntary Recovery of Vernal Pool Ecosystems *Bidwell Ranch vernal pools are site of presentation*

A comprehensive strategy for landowners and other interests to cooperate in recovering complete vernal pool ecosystems was presented today by representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), the Butte Environmental Council (Council), and New Urban Builders. The Vernal Pool Ecosystems Recovery Plan (Plan) was published this month by the Service, to meet a due date established by the courts after the Council sued to force completion of the plan.

Vernal pools are unique ponds without external drainage that occur in shallow valley and foothill depressions. Vernal pools spring to life with California's winter rains. They produce brilliant arrays of flowers and remarkable tiny shrimp, then dry up quickly in the hot summer sun. But more than 75 per cent of California's vernal pools have been lost and the rate of destruction continues today.

The plan breaks new ground for the Service in its efforts to recover and de-list threatened and endangered species. The plan:

- Is a strategy for recovery of an entire ecosystem, rather than a single species.
- Covers 20 federally listed (threatened or endangered) plants and animals, plus 13 species of concern that the Service hopes can be recovered and conserved before they decline to where they warrant listing.
- Defines an extensive strategy for voluntary cooperation with landowners.
- Uses survival over a long period of time in California's widely variable Mediterranean climate as a threshold to determine if the species have recovered.

The plan is an effort to partner with all interests in voluntary actions to save and restore vernal pool species, while enabling landowners to maintain compatible activities. The plan envisions local working groups composed of landowners, local government and private interests, environmental representatives and the Service taking the lead to implement recovery actions.

In a news conference at Bidwell Ranch site with a colorful backdrop of vernal pool flowers, speakers for the three perspectives emphasized their enthusiasm for the voluntary program.

“The Vernal Pool Ecosystems Recovery Plan is a wonderful opportunity for preserving, recovering and delisting these 20 species,” according to Cay Goude, assistant field supervisor for the Service.

“We are hopeful that this Recovery Plan will serve as beacon to guide recovery strategies that are as successful as those implemented for our national symbol, the bald eagle,” stated Barbara Vlamis, executive director of Butte Environmental Council. “Collaborative efforts are already underway to protect vernal pool grasslands through the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition with landowners, agencies, and environmental organizations, if only Congress and the legislatures in California and Oregon will add their commitment to the effort,” she continued.

“The Recovery Plan allows local government and builders to plan effectively and with greater certainty,” said Tom DiGiovanni, president of New Urban Builders, Inc. “It promotes reasonable and rational decision-making within the larger framework of the region. Too often the discussions and battles over preservation are fought in the absence of a regional perspective. This represents an important step toward real and effective solutions.”

Vernal pools occur in scattered foothill and valley areas from southern Oregon to California’s southern border. The pools come to life when winter rains collect in shallow, impermeable basins. Numerous species of animals and plants have adapted to a pattern of winter filling and summer drying. In the spring, most vernal pools are easily identified by concentric circles of beautiful wildflowers. Animal species, including tiny shrimp, hatch and complete their life cycle in just a few weeks, then lay eggs in the drying mud to wait through the hot, dry summer until the next rainy season.

Vernal pools originally existed on 22 million acres of California and Oregon land. Urbanization, agriculture and fragmentation have destroyed at least 75 percent of vernal pools. Habitat loss is the greatest threat to the survival and recovery of vernal pool species.

The Plan focuses on 683,000 acres of the most important remaining vernal pool areas in 16 distinct regions. This plan proposes a variety of strategies and partnerships with private landowners and agencies to:

- Protect habitat, primarily through conservation agreements.
- Cooperatively develop and implement habitat management plans for vernal pools.
- Document the status of each species through comprehensive monitoring.
- Conduct research on the effectiveness of various management and conservation strategies.
- Encourage public participation through outreach and education.

The Service develops and implements recovery plans for animals and plants protected by the Endangered Species Act in the United States. Recovery plans detail the actions necessary to achieve self-sustaining, wild populations of listed species so they will no longer require protection under the Act. This plan includes species of concern because an ecosystem-level strategy provides opportunities for their conservation also.

Recovery plans are not regulatory documents. They do not mandate actions on the part of non-Federal landowners and agencies, and they do not, of themselves, commit manpower or funds. They are, however, used in setting regional and national funding priorities and providing direction to local, regional, and State planning efforts.

The federally endangered plants are Loch Lomond button-celery, Contra Costa goldfields, Butte County meadowfoam, few-flowered navarretia, many-flowered navarretia, hairy Orcutt grass, Sacramento Orcutt grass, Lake County stonecrop, Greene’s tuctoria, and Solano grass. The federally threatened plants

are fleshy owl's clover, Hoover's spurge, Colusa grass, San Joaquin Valley Orcutt grass, and slender Orcutt grass.

The three federally endangered animals are the Conservancy fairy shrimp, longhorn fairy shrimp and the vernal pool tadpole shrimp. The two federally threatened animals are vernal pool fairy shrimp and delta green ground beetle.

In addition, 13 species of concern are addressed. The plants are Ferris' milk vetch, alkali milk vetch, persistent-fruited saltscale, spiny-sepaled button-celery, Boggs Lake hedge-hyssop, Ahart's dwarf rush, legenere, little mouse tail, pincushion navarretia, and bearded popcorn flower. The animals are the mid-valley fairy shrimp, California linderiella, and western spadefoot toad.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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