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News Release



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Economists calculate high cost for Alameda whipsnake critical habitat *Real estate development costs estimated at half a billion dollars in Alameda, Contra Costa counties*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released a draft economic analysis of its proposal to designate up to 203,342 acres as critical habitat for the federally threatened Alameda whipsnake in California's Alameda and Contra Costa counties, plus tiny areas in Santa Clara and San Joaquin counties.

The draft economic analysis says that the critical habitat "is expected to have the largest impacts on real estate development," and estimates the cost to be nearly \$533 million over the next 20 years. Publication of the analysis, prepared under contract by CRA International, an Oakland firm, opens a 30-day public comment period that closes June 5, 2006.

In Contra Costa County the impacts are estimated at \$335 million, while in Alameda County they are \$195 million. San Joaquin County impacts are \$1.6 million and those in Santa Clara County \$93,082; estimates are lower because critical habitat is only proposed for isolated areas at the edge of those counties.

Almost all of the cost is in "surplus lost." The draft economic analysis explains that it "quantifies the economic effects...by taking into account the cost of conservation-related measures that are likely to be associated with future economic activities that may adversely affect the habitat within the proposed boundaries." It notes that the impacts "vary widely even within counties. That is, the impacts of designation are frequently localized."

The biggest impacts are calculated to be in the hills centered on the Sunol Ridge of Alameda County, where the cost of lost opportunities for housing on the edges of Pleasanton, Hayward and Dublin amount to more than \$150 million, and in Contra Costa County on the edges of Concord, Lafayette, Blackhawk and Martinez where costs are calculated at more than \$25 million in each of four census tracts.

However, the analysis also finds that "critical habitat designation has little effect on the regional economy," reducing the region's output by just 0.02 percent.

Last fall the Service proposed 203,342 acres as critical habitat, but added that it is considering excluding 60,105 acres because they are already under existing or proposed government agency conservation plans that benefit the Alameda whipsnake. The two major proposed exclusions are for lands managed by the East Bay Regional Park District and areas within the pending East Contra Costa Habitat Conservation Plan.

In a separate process, the Service is completing a recovery plan for the Alameda whipsnake and other species in the East Bay's chaparral and scrub habitat. The draft Recovery Plan for the Chaparral & Scrub Community East of San Francisco Bay, proposed in 2003, is expected to be completed in 2006. A copy of the plan is available at <http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/ea/Documents/Chaparral%20Draft%20Recovery%20Plan%20WEB.pdf>.

Written comments on the proposal should be submitted by June 5, 2006 to the Field Supervisor, Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office, 2800 Cottage Way, Room W-2605, Sacramento, CA 95825. Comments may also be sent by electronic mail to alameda_whipsnake@fws.gov.

The non-venomous Alameda whipsnake is slender and fast-moving, sooty black with distinct yellow-orange stripes running down each side. It can reach a length of up to four feet and feeds almost exclusively on lizards. Residential, commercial and recreational development, and certain fire suppression activities threaten the Alameda whipsnake. The species was designated as threatened in 1997.

The Service first designated critical habitat for the Alameda whipsnake on Oct. 3, 2000. On June 7, 2001, the Home Builders Association of Northern California and others filed a lawsuit in the Eastern District of California against the Service, challenging the way the Service identified critical habitat and the adequacy of the economic analysis that was part of the final designation (Home Builders Association of Northern California, et al. v. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, et al., CV F 01-5722 AWI SMS).

On May 9, 2003, the U.S. District Judge vacated the rule and ordered the Service to re-do critical habitat and conduct a new economic analysis. On January 14, 2004, the Court ordered the Service to complete a final critical habitat rule by Oct. 1, 2006.

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.