

## ***Background and Q&As*** ***About the California Tiger Salamander***

Prepared by the Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office  
Updated July 2004

### **A summary of today's actions:**

- The Service adopts a final rule listing the Central California distinct population segment (DPS) of the California tiger salamander as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.
- As part of the final rule, the Service adopts a special rule under Section 4(d) of the ESA granting an exemption from some provisions of the act for routine ranching activities.
- The final rule also changes the status of the Sonoma and Santa Barbara DPSs from endangered to threatened, consolidates the three DPSs into one rangewide listing as threatened, and extends the 4(d) rule to the Sonoma and Santa Barbara populations.
- The Service also will propose critical habitat for the Central California tiger salamander (not Sonoma and Santa Barbara), and at that point will open a 60-day comment period. Critical habitat for Santa Barbara County has already been proposed, while the Service is not proposing critical habitat for Sonoma County at this time because it might conflict with ongoing conservation efforts.

### **Description of the species:**

The California tiger salamander is a stocky terrestrial salamander with a broad, rounded snout. Adult males may reach a total length of 8.2 inches while females are slightly smaller, reaching approximately 6.8 inches in length. The dorsal areas of the salamander can have white or pale yellow spots or bars on a black background. The underside varies from almost uniform white or pale yellow to a varying pattern of white or pale yellow and black.

### **Range:**

This species is restricted to California and does not overlap with any other species of tiger salamander. California tiger salamanders are restricted to vernal pools and seasonal ponds, including many constructed stockponds, in grassland and oak savannah plant communities from sea level to about 1,500 feet in central California. In the Coastal region, populations are scattered from the northern San Francisco Bay Area to Santa Barbara County, and in the Central Valley and Sierra Nevada foothills from Yolo to Kern counties.

### **Life history:**

Subadult and adult California tiger salamanders spend much of their lives in burrows of ground squirrels and pocket gophers. Once rains begin they emerge from their burrows at night to feed and migrate to breed at vernal pools, seasonal ponds, or stock ponds.

Adults may migrate up to 1.2 miles from their summering grounds to breeding areas. Males will remain in the breeding ponds for 6 to 8 weeks while females stay for about 1 to 2 weeks. Female California tiger salamanders lay eggs singly or in small groups. Of the 400 to 1,300 eggs a female lays per breeding season, only a few animals survive. Eggs are generally attached to vegetation near the edge of the breeding pond, but in cases where there is little or no vegetation, the eggs may be attached to rocks or other material such as branches on the bottom of the pond.

It takes about 10 to 14 days for the eggs to hatch. Larvae feed on algae, small crustaceans and mosquito larvae for about six weeks after hatching. After that time the larvae begin feeding on larger prey including small tadpoles as well as many aquatic insects. California tiger salamander larvae reach maturity in approximately 60 to 94 days. In late spring or early summer the salamanders leave the ponds to seek out small mammal burrows to begin their dormancy.

**Q. What is the population of the California tiger salamander?**

A. The total number of individual California tiger salamanders rangewide is not known.

**Q. Why does the Service believe the California tiger salamander is threatened, and what factors are causing its decline?**

A. In the absence of population data, the Service believes that habitat loss and fragmentation are valid indicators of the decline of the species. About 75 percent of California tiger salamander habitat has already been lost, and much of the remaining habitat is under threat from urban development and conversion of rangeland to intensive agriculture.

Other primary threats are hybridization, or interbreeding, with non-native salamanders, and predation by non-native species. The threat of hybridization is particularly severe in the Central Coast Range and the Bay Area, and to a lesser extent the Central Valley.

**Q. Where are California tiger salamanders found?**

A. California tiger salamanders have been documented historically in 27 counties – Alameda, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Contra Costa, Fresno, Glenn, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Monterey, Sacramento, San Benito, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Solano, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tulare and Yolo. The species appears to have disappeared from three counties – Butte, Glenn, and Sutter. The Service believes it is still present in the remaining 24 counties.

**Q. What is the history of today's actions?**

A. The Service was petitioned in 1992 to list the species as endangered. The Service completed a review in 1994 that concluded that listing was warranted but precluded by higher priority listing actions.

On February 27, 2002, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a complaint in the Federal Court of the Northern District of California for the Service's failure to list the Sonoma County Distinct Population Segment of the California tiger salamander as endangered.

On June 6, 2002, based on a settlement agreement between the Service and the Center for Biological Diversity, the Court signed an order requiring the Service to submit for publication in the *Federal Register* a proposal to list the California tiger salamander (except for the Santa Barbara County and Sonoma County Distinct Population Segments) on or before May 15, 2003 and to submit a final determination on that proposed rule for publication in the Federal Register on or before May 15, 2004.

**Q. Why did the Service not meet the May 15, 2004, deadline?**

A. On May 14, 2004, the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks at the U.S. Department of the Interior asked the Court for a six-month extension of the May 15, 2004, deadline. The Assistant Secretary based the request on his assessment that there was substantial scientific disagreement on several issues, including current and future habitat losses. The Court granted an extension to July 23, 2004, to give the Service time to resolve the issues. This final listing determination has considered the latest scientific information, including California Department of Conservation reports on the loss of farmland and rangeland.

**Q. How will the listing of the California tiger salamander affect landowners?**

A. Projects undertaken on Federal land, or projects on private lands that need Federal permits or funds, must be reviewed by the Service under the section 7 consultation provision of the Endangered Species Act, if tiger salamanders or their habitat are present.

Private landowners who wish to undertake projects on private lands that do not have a Federal nexus (meaning no Federal permits or Federal funding is involved) don't have to "consult" under Section 7, but are prohibited by Section 9 of the ESA from the "take" of California tiger salamanders. However, non-Federal parties may be granted incidental take permits through Section 10 of the ESA through a mechanism known as a habitat conservation plan, or HCP. An HCP allows the Service to issue a permit authorizing "take" of endangered or threatened species incidental to otherwise lawful activities when the taking is mitigated by agreed-upon conservation measures.

**Q. What is the special rule for routine ranching activities?**

A. To promote conservation efforts of the California tiger salamander, the Service is adopting a special rule under section 4(d) of the Act. Section 4(d) allows the Secretary of Interior to issue a "special rule" tailored to meet the conservation needs of a particular threatened species. (Special rules cannot be issued for endangered species.)

In this rule, "take" of the threatened California tiger salamander caused by existing routine ranching activities on private, State or tribal lands is exempt from the prohibitions of the Act. The intent of the rule is to allow landowners and ranchers to continue activities that are important for livestock operations, because those activities also maintain habitat for the California tiger salamander.

**Q. Why is the Service changing the status of the Santa Barbara County and Sonoma County populations from endangered to threatened?**

A. There are geographic and genetic divisions within the California tiger salamander population. But after reviewing the species rangewide (Central California, Sonoma and Santa Barbara), the Service has concluded that several factors justify a uniform listing as threatened.

For instance, the primary threat for all three populations is habitat loss and fragmentation. Yet the salamander continues to exist throughout the majority of its historic range, and sufficient habitat remains to support species recovery. Thus, the Service believes that on a rangewide basis, the California tiger salamander is threatened throughout its range and it is not endangered with extinction in the foreseeable future.

A uniform listing will also lead to more consistent and uniform conservation measures. In particular, the special rule for routine ranching activities, which will play a key role in protecting the remaining habitat for the California tiger salamander, can be applied in both Sonoma and Santa Barbara counties. The Endangered Species Act does not allow special rules for endangered species.

In addition, the consolidation of the three populations is consistent with Congressional instruction to use the Endangered Species Act's policy on "distinct population segments" sparingly.

**Q. What is critical habitat?**

A. Critical habitat is a term used in the Endangered Species Act that identifies specific areas, both occupied and unoccupied by a listed species, which are essential to the conservation of the species and that may require special management considerations or protection.

**Q. What impact does critical habitat have on landowners?**

A. A designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and has no specific regulatory impact on landowners taking actions on their land that do not involve Federal agency funds, authorization or permits. However, landowners must consult with the Service before taking actions on their property which could harm or kill protected species or destroy their habitat, regardless of whether critical habitat has been designated.

**Q. Is it unusual for the Service to propose critical habitat at the same time as listing?**

A. No. The Service does not always have the resources to propose critical habitat at the time of listing. But since 2001, the Service has proposed critical habitat at the same time it has proposed listing three times.

**Q. Where is critical habitat being proposed?**

The proposed critical habitat is in the following 20 counties in central California: Alameda, Amador, Calaveras, Contra Costa, Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Monterey, Sacramento, San Benito, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, Santa Clara, Solano, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Yolo.

**Q. Why did the Service not propose critical habitat today for the Sonoma and Santa Barbara populations of the California tiger salamander?**

A. The Service proposed critical habitat for the Santa Barbara County population in January.

The Service is not proposing to designate critical habitat for the Sonoma County population of the California tiger salamander at this time. We are currently in the process of developing a management strategy for Sonoma County for the California tiger salamander and other listed and sensitive species. The planning efforts include various local, state and Federal agencies including the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the California Department of Fish and Game, the County of Sonoma, the cities of Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, and Cotati, and local and regional environmental organizations. We believe that currently designating proposed critical habitat would cause more harm to the species by causing delays to and confusing the current on-going process.

**Q. How can people comment on the proposed critical habitat?**

A. We will accept comments from interested parties during a 60-day comment period that begins when the proposed critical habitat is published in the Federal Register.

The Service plans to schedule at least one and possibly more public hearings, where people can submit oral or written comments. The dates and times of those hearings have not been determined.

Also, people may submit written comments and materials to the Service by any one of several methods:

- By mail to the Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office (SFWO), 2800 Cottage Way, W-2605, Sacramento, CA 95825.
- By hand delivery to the address above.
- Or by e-mail to [fw1Central\\_cts\\_pch@fws.gov](mailto:fw1Central_cts_pch@fws.gov)

More questions?

Please write or call:

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