

**Interim Guidance on Site Assessment and Field Surveys for Determining Presence or a  
Negative Finding of the California Tiger Salamander  
October 2003**

The Santa Barbara County population of the California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*) was federally listed as endangered on September 21, 2000 (65 FR 57242). The Sonoma County Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of the California tiger salamander was listed as endangered on July 22, 2002 (67 FR 47727). The Central California DPS of the California tiger salamander was proposed for listing as threatened on May 23, 2003 (68 FR 28648). The Santa Barbara and Sonoma County DPSs were proposed for reclassification from endangered to threatened, on May 23, 2003 (68 FR 28648). The California Department of Fish and Game (Department) considers the California tiger salamander throughout its entire range to be a species of special concern.

(Special Animals List July 2003 <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/biogeodata/cnddb/pdfs/SPAnimals.pdf> )

The Service and Department have received numerous requests for guidance in planning for the protection of the California tiger salamander (CTS) at the sites of proposed and existing land use activities. This document provides interim guidance for two procedures to accurately assess the likelihood of CTS presence in the vicinity of a project site, including: (1) an assessment of CTS locality records and potential CTS habitat in and around the project area; and (2) focused field surveys of breeding pools and their associated uplands to determine whether CTS are likely to be present.

Because CTS use aquatic and upland habitats during their life cycle, they may be present in either or both habitats on a given property. For sites with suitable breeding habitat, two consecutive seasons of negative larval surveys and a negative upland drift fence study in the intervening fall/winter are recommended to support a negative finding. For sites with no suitable aquatic breeding habitat, but where suitable upland habitat exists, two consecutive seasons of negative upland drift fence studies are recommended to support a negative finding.

**If the following Guidance is followed completely, the results of these site assessments and field surveys will be considered valid by the Service and Department.** Results of the site assessments and field surveys should be reported to the appropriate Service's Field Office, if appropriate the Service's Regional Office in Portland, Oregon pursuant to the terms and conditions of the permittee's section 10(a)(1)(A) recovery permit, and to the Department and other agencies or offices as required. Details regarding the recommended content and/or format of reports are provided throughout the remainder of this document.

Surveyors must obtain permission of the landowner before implementing any surveys or research on the CTS. **In locations where the CTS is federally listed surveyors should obtain a Recovery Permit for this species pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, prior to implementing the guidance.** For surveys that may ultimately be used in support of a negative finding, it is recommended that surveyors consult with Service biologists on their study design before beginning work. If surveyors are working in areas with other federally listed species that are likely to be captured incidentally during CTS surveys, surveyors should also possess a valid 10(a)(1)(A) permit for these species (e.g., California red-legged frog, vernal pool tadpole shrimp, etc.). For all locations, the surveyor should hold an active Scientific Collecting Permit from the Department that specifically names CTS surveys as an authorized activity. Authorization Number 9, without explicit permission for handling CTS, is not adequate for CTS surveys.

**Site Assessment for the California tiger salamander**

Available information about CTS and their habitats in the vicinity of the project should be used to determine the likelihood that CTS may occur there and if field surveys are appropriate. The project proponent should compile and submit to the Service and the Department the following information:

Element 1. Is the project site within the range of the CTS?

The surveyor should review the attached maps or referenced weblink to determine if the project site is within the range of

the CTS. For Sonoma County, refer to the attached county map ([Sonoma County](#) pdf). For Santa Barbara County, refer to [http://www.fws.gov/ventura/es/protocols/ctsfieldsurvey\\_protocols.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/ventura/es/protocols/ctsfieldsurvey_protocols.pdf) . For Monterey, San Benito, and San Luis Obispo counties, contact the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office at the address provided below. For all other areas, refer to the attached map of California ([all of California](#) pdf).

Element 2. What are the known localities of CTS within the project site and within 3.1 miles (5.0 kilometers) (km) of the project boundaries?

This is to place the project site in a regional perspective. The surveyor should consult the California Natural Diversity Data Base (CNDDDB) maintained by the Department to determine known localities of the CTS. The Sacramento or Ventura Fish and Wildlife Offices should be contacted for localities within their respective jurisdictions. Other information sources on local occurrences of CTS should be consulted. These sources may include, but are not limited to, biological consultants, local residents, amateur herpetologists, resources managers and biologists from municipal, state, and Federal agencies, environmental groups, and herpetologists at museums and universities. The surveyor should note in their report all known CTS localities within the project site and within 3.1 miles of the project boundaries; if there are no localities within 3.1 miles, the nearest locality should be noted.

Element 3. What are the habitats within the project site and within 1.24 miles (2 km) of the project boundaries?

This distance is based on the observed mobility of the species. Describe the upland and aquatic habitats within the project site and within 1.24 miles of the project boundaries. Characteristics of the site that should be recorded include acreage, elevation, topography, plant communities, presence and types of water bodies, fossorial mammal species and their burrows, current land use, a description of adjacent lands, and an assessment of potential barriers to CTS movement. Use of aerial photographs is necessary to characterize potential breeding habitats that are not part of the project site under consideration. The aquatic habitats should be mapped and characterized (e.g., natural vernal pools, stockponds, drainage ditches, creeks, types of vegetation, surface area, depth, approximate drying date). Suitable upland habitat, including locations of underground refugia, for CTS should be mapped as well, with a focus on areas where small mammal burrows are located or are most dense.

### **Reporting and interpretation of the site assessment**

Site assessments should include, but are not limited to, the following information: (1) photographs of the project site(s); (2) survey dates and times; names of evaluator(s); (3) a description of the site assessment methods used; (4) a list of CTS localities, as requested above; and (5) a map of the site(s) showing habitat as requested above. Maps should be of similar nature to a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5-minute (1:24,000) topographic maps -or- Geographic Information System (GIS) data depicting the site(s) and the area within 5 kilometers (3.2 miles) of its boundaries. The report should be provided to the appropriate Service field office and Department regional office prior to initiating field surveys.

After completing items 1-3 of the site assessment (as above), send a report to the appropriate Service field office and Department regional office. Based on the information provided from the site assessment, the Service and Department will provide recommendations as to the appropriateness of field surveys. Surveys should not be initiated until recommended by the Service and Department.

### **Interim Presence/Negative Finding Survey Guidance for the California Tiger Salamander**

Biological field surveys should be conducted for all sites with potential CTS habitat. Due to its unique life history, the CTS can be difficult to detect depending on weather and time of year. Aquatic sampling for larvae during spring months can be the most effective way to determine if CTS are present in a given area. However, especially if environmental conditions are unfavorable, CTS may not breed successfully in a given year. After metamorphosis CTS spend most of each year on land, emerging from refugia only occasionally, usually on rainy nights. CTS have been observed on land 1.24 miles from any potential breeding pool.

At sites that contain both upland habitat and potential breeding habitat (i.e., pools that contain standing water continuously for at least 10 weeks, extending into April), aquatic sampling during two breeding seasons and a drift fence study in the intervening winter should be conducted to support a negative finding. At sites that contain appropriate upland habitat only, but where there is a known or potential breeding site accessible within 1.24 miles, a two-year drift fence study should be conducted.

In years with little rainfall, upland emergence may be reduced and CTS may not breed. Field surveys conducted in years with at least 70% of average rainfall between September 1 and April 1, at the nearest National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration climate station are most reliable. Data from survey seasons not meeting this criterion will also be considered; surveyors should provide strong justification that their data are reliable including but not limited to local climate (e.g., daily rainfall totals, pond filling date, pond drying date) and biological survey data (e.g., other species captured during each sampling interval).

### **Aquatic larval sampling**

1. Aquatic larval surveys of potential breeding pools should be repeated three times each season. Surveys should be conducted once each in March, April, and May, with at least 10 days between surveys. **If pools are likely to dry prior to the completion of three surveys, the sampling schedule should be shifted accordingly.**
2. Captured CTS should remain in nets for the minimum amount of time necessary, but no longer than 5 minutes. During this time, larvae should not be kept out of water for more than 30 seconds. Photographs should document a representative sample of captured CTS.
3. Disruption to the pond's bottom should be minimized. Shallow areas where young larvae may occur should be traversed in the most direct and least disturbing manner possible.
4. Sampling should cease once presence has been determined to minimize disturbance of pool flora and fauna. If CTS are detected at a pond, subsequent visits to that pond are not necessary.
5. Ponds should be initially sampled using D-shaped or similar, long-handled dipnets with 1/8th inch (3.2mm) or finer mesh. If CTS larvae are not captured in the first 50 dipnet sweeps, covering representative portions of the pond, seines should be used.
6. If dipnetting has been unsuccessful, seines should be used to sample 100% of the surface area of ponds smaller than 1 acre and at least 30% of the surface area of larger pools, including a representative sample from different water depths and vegetated and non-vegetated areas. One eighth inch (3.2 mm) or finer mesh minnow seines with weights along the bottom and floats along the top edge should be used, with dowling or PVC pipe attached to the end of the seine so the bottom edge can be dragged along the bottom of the pool. Whenever possible, the seine should be pulled from one edge of the pond to the other.
7. Use of minnow traps will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Minnow trapping for CTS larvae should only be conducted in habitats that are too deep to adequately survey with dipnets and seines, or in which dense vegetation impedes normal dipnetting/seining activities. **In these cases the surveyor should submit to the Service a written minnow trap sampling design based on the requirements detailed below.** No minnow trapping should be conducted in ponds known to support state or federally threatened or endangered animals (e.g., California red-legged frogs (*Rana aurora draytonii*)). In areas where California red-legged frogs may occur, minnow trapping should be preceded by negative surveys following the Service guidelines for this species. To conduct minnow trap sampling in pools known to contain California red-legged frogs, surveyors must possess a valid Recovery Permit for this species pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended.

Minnow trapping should be conducted in the following manner:

- a. Minnow traps should be monitored for three three-day intervals between March 1 and May 15 (for a total of nine days of trapping per site). Trapping intervals should be separated by at least ten days. Minnow trap surveys should immediately cease if CTS presence is determined.
  - b. Minnow trapping should be avoided during warm periods when air temperatures reach 80 degrees Fahrenheit or when water temperatures reach 70 degrees Fahrenheit or warmer, to prevent the possibility of mortality due to reduced oxygen availability.
  - c. Minnow traps should be deployed overnight and checked frequently enough to ensure that larvae are not killed or injured. Traps should be checked at least once per day.
  - d. A minimum of four traps should be placed in each pond. For larger ponds, traps should be distributed along the shoreline with no more than 75 ft (23 m) between traps. Each trap should be clearly marked with the name, telephone number, and State and Federal permit number of the surveyor. Traps should be anchored to stakes set near the shoreline. Steel braided fishing line or heavy cord works well for this purpose; galvanized wire and stainless steel wire should not be used because these wires may kink and break. If livestock are present, we recommend that the surveyor devise a method to anchor the trap in a manner to prevent entanglement of livestock. Brightly colored flagging should be affixed to each anchor point. For extra security, a float attached to each trap can aid in detection. If a minnow trap is lost, every effort should be made to recover it to avoid the possibility of leaving behind a trap that can kill a variety of species over time.
  - e. Traps should be deployed to the deepest parts of ponds and in shoreline areas with aquatic vegetation growth.
9. Data regarding the type and quality of each pool sampled should be recorded. At a minimum, these data should include the date and time, location, type of water body (e.g., vernal pool, seasonal wetland, artificial impoundment, etc.), dimension and depth of pond, water temperature, turbidity, presence of aquatic vegetation (submergent and emergent), and dominant invertebrates and all vertebrates observed. Photographs of pools and adjacent upland areas are helpful and copies should be included in the final report.
10. Surveyors should follow guidance below for disinfecting equipment and clothing after surveying a pond and before entering a new pond, unless the two ponds are hydrologically connected to one another. These recommendations are adapted from the Declining Amphibian Population Task Force's Code which can be found in their entirety at: <http://www.open.ac.uk/daptf/>.
- a. All dirt and debris, including mud, snails, plant material (including fruits and seeds), and algae, should be removed from nets, traps, boots, vehicle tires and all other surfaces that have come into contact with water. Cleaned items should be rinsed with clean water before leaving each study site.
  - b. Boots, nets, traps, etc., should then be scrubbed with either a 70 % ethanol solution, a bleach solution (0.5 to 1.0 cup of bleach to 1.0 gallon of water), QUAT 128 (quaternary ammonium, use 1:60 dilution), or a 6% sodium hypochlorite 3 solution and rinsed clean with water between study sites. Cleaning equipment in the immediate vicinity of a pond or wetland should be avoided. Care should be taken so that all traces of the disinfectant are removed before entering the next aquatic habitat.
  - c. When working at sites with known or suspected disease problems, disposable gloves should be worn and changed between handling each animal.
  - d. Used cleaning materials (liquids, etc.) should be disposed of safely, and if necessary, taken back to the lab for proper disposal. Used disposable gloves should be retained for safe disposal in sealed bags.

## Upland Habitat Survey Methods

A drift fence study conducted during fall and winter is the primary method used to study CTS in upland habitats. To support a negative finding, an upland drift fence study should be included. Although less intrusive methods (see below) may also be used to determine presence of the CTS, these methods are less reliable and thus cannot be used to support a negative finding.

Because CTS have been observed to make breeding migrations of at least 0.6 miles (1 km), the project proponent or the Service may assume presence of CTS if a known breeding pond lies within 1 km and no significant barriers exist. Examples of significant physical barriers include high-density residential or urban development and Interstate Highways, while features such as golf courses, disked fields, and most paved roads are not considered barriers.

For sites with at least one accessible potential breeding pool, we recommend that a one-year drift fence study be conducted during the winter between two consecutive seasons of aquatic larval surveys (if presence of CTS was not established during the first season of aquatic sampling). We recommend that a two year drift fence study be conducted if: 1) a site has suitable upland habitat and a potential breeding pool lies within 1.2 miles (2 km); 2) on-site ponds cannot be adequately sampled using aquatic methods (e.g., deep impoundments with known presence of California red-legged frogs); or 3) if non-native predators or poor water quality may preclude detection of CTS during larval sampling (i.e., due to mortality of the larvae).

1. We recommend that a proposal to conduct a drift fence study be submitted in writing to the Service and the Department. The results of studies not approved by the Service and Department may not be accepted in support of a negative finding. The proposal should include an aerial photograph of the study site indicating all potential on- and off-site breeding locations identified in the site assessment and an overlay with the proposed drift fence study design clearly delineated. We recommend that drift fence study designs incorporate the following:
  - a. **For sites with at least one suitable breeding pond** (i.e., ponds that contain standing water for at least 10 continuous weeks in most years), the ponds should be surrounded by drift fences installed 10 - 50 ft from the high water line. Sections of drift fence should be spaced regularly around the pond, focusing on areas where salamanders are most likely to be captured. We recommend that each section of fence be at least 30 ft (9.2 m) long, and that the total distance between fence sections be no greater than the total length of installed fence (i.e., >50% of the circumference fenced). There should be no more than 33 ft (10 m) between pitfall traps, and drift fences should be constructed such that during periods when traps are closed, openings at least every 66 ft (20 m) allow animal passage.
  - b. **For all sites**, we also recommend upland drift fences. Unless a strong rationale can be presented, drift fence equaling at least 90% of the site perimeter should be installed. The exact placement of fences should be selected to maximize the probability of capturing CTS (e.g., in grassland areas with high densities of mammal burrows; along site boundaries closest to identified potential breeding pools; with pitfalls situated away from areas where flooding is likely). Pitfalls should be spaced less than 33 ft apart. To the extent possible drift fences and pitfalls should be placed to minimize the number of flooded buckets. Each section of fence should be a minimum of 30 ft (9.2 m) long, unless topography, property lines, or other circumstances dictate. Upland drift fences should be constructed such that during periods when traps are closed, openings at least every 66 ft (20 m) allow animal passage.
2. Arrays should be approved and constructed by 15 October. Beginning on or before October 15, pitfall buckets should be opened before sunset if there was any rain during the day or if at 2 PM rain is forecast for the remainder of the day or subsequent night with 70% or greater probability (based on the nearest National Weather Service forecast - available at <http://www.wrh.noaa.gov/Sacramento/> ). Traps should be open each night and checked each morning until no rain has fallen within the preceding 24 hours. Nights of high relative humidity (greater than 75% relative

humidity) should be considered equivalent to rain events once onsite or nearby seasonal wetlands have become inundated with standing water, regardless of its depth, surface area, or duration. The above guidance should be followed until 20 nights of surveying under the proper conditions has been conducted. After 20 nights of surveying is completed, and until March 15, pitfall buckets should be opened before sunset if there was any rain during the day, or if at 2 PM rain is forecast for the remainder of the day or subsequent night with 70% or greater probability. Traps will be checked the next morning, and unless it is still raining or more rain is forecast, the traps can be closed until the next rain event.

3. Drift fences should be constructed from a material that is durable, weather resistant, and **appropriate for the area in which it will be installed; proposals should describe the materials to be used.** Examples include aluminum flashing, silt fencing, untreated wood particle board, shade cloth, window screen, Vexar plastic mesh, etc. Hardware cloth may be useful for short segments of fence that experience heavy overland water flow. Drift fences should be buried at least 3 inches (8 cm) underground and extend at least 1 ft (31 cm) above the ground. All drift fences require regular inspections and maintenance, especially after each significant storm event. If drift fences are installed incorrectly and/or have insufficient maintenance this may call into question the reliability of the data. Unless special authorization is received from the Service and Department to maintain drift fences through non-sampling months, drift fencing should be disassembled by April 1.
4. Pitfall traps should not be placed in a manner that will disturb or destroy rodent burrows or other refugia that could be used by CTS.
5. Excessive pitfall flooding may invalidate a study. To avoid flooding traps should be placed preferentially in slightly elevated locations where flooding is less likely. Pitfalls in locations likely to flood should be free of holes. If ground saturation forces a pitfall out of the soil it can be weighted down with cement, gravel or other suitable materials.
6. All pitfall traps should have a rigid lid that closes securely. When not in use, traps should be closed in a manner that precludes entry by CTS and other animals.
7. Pitfall traps should be cylindrical, non-galvanized, metal or plastic containers. They should be at least 2-gallons in size and 8 in (20 cm) deep.
8. Each pitfall trap should contain noncellulose sponges or other nontoxic absorbent material which should be kept moist at all times.
9. Each pitfall trap should have a rigid cover with legs one to two inches high to provide shade and shed water during extreme rain events.
10. When in use, pitfall traps should be checked as often as necessary, but at a minimum one time a day, with one of these checks occurring between one hour before sunrise and noon. Whenever possible, traps should be opened just before dark and checked and closed the following morning.
11. When not in use, the drift fence and pitfall traps should be inspected weekly to ensure the system has not been disturbed by vandals, wildlife, fallen trees, wind, etc. Repairs to fences should be completed prior to the next night of sampling.
12. Pitfall traps should be placed as far as possible from ant nests. If an ant nest develops within 10 feet of an existing pitfall trap, the pitfall trap should be moved, removed from the field, or closed.
13. Captured CTS should be released as near as possible to the point of capture, in a manner that maximizes their survival. CTS should be released into the mouth of a small mammal burrow or other suitable refugia. CTS should be

watched after release to be sure that they are in a safe location and are not susceptible to increased predation risk.

14. Once a CTS is captured, all traps and drift fences should be emptied and removed within 24 hours, and holes in the ground which contain traps should be filled in.
15. In addition, to minimize mortality of small mammals that may become trapped during surveys, each pitfall trap should also incorporate either jute twine, as described in Karraker (2001; <http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/rsl/projects/wild/karraker/karraker4.pdf> ), a rodent safe-house as described in Padgett-Flohr and Jennings (2001), or other material as approved by the Service and Department.
16. Each pitfall trap should be marked with the name, telephone number, and Department permit number.

### **Other methods**

Other methods, such as visual egg surveys, night driving, nocturnal surveys, fiber optic scoping and cover-boards, may be used to determine presence of the CTS, but these techniques may not be accepted in support of a negative finding. Deviations from this guidance may be approved on a case-by-case basis if a strong rationale can be presented.

### **Reporting**

If one or more CTS are captured or detected a representative sample of the embryo(s), larva(e), or transformed salamander(s) should be photographed. The Service and the Department should be contacted by telephone within 3 working days if CTS are captured. If any mortality of California tiger salamander occurs, specimens should be collected, preserved by freezing, and the Service and the Department contacted by telephone within 1 work day.

For each survey location, a final report detailing the survey results should be submitted to the Service and the Department within one month of the last site visit. The written report should include, but is not be limited to, the following information: names of surveyors and copies of permits and authorizations, a description and map at the appropriate resolution of the type and quality of upland and aquatic habitats and land uses at the site; a map indicating the location of water bodies sampled for larvae; a map indicating the location of drift fences and pitfalls. The survey report also should include survey methods used, the dates and times of surveys, rainfall totals by date, nightly minimum temperatures, number and length of dipnet sweeps made, number of passes with seine, total estimated area seined, records of upland and aquatic animals captured, and pond water temperature, turbidity, and maximum depth at each aquatic sampling. If CTS are detected on the site, the report should include a map indicating the precise location of all CTS observations and captures, the number of CTS egg masses, larvae, sub-adults and adults observed, and photographic verification of CTS from the site. Site photographs may also be helpful in interpreting survey results. For the Department, survey reports should also include CNDDDB field locality forms. Locality information should be in the form of UTM or latitude/longitude (degree, minute, second) coordinates.

In the case of a negative finding including a season with 70% of average rainfall, additional information (e.g., pond filling/drying dates, quantity and timing of rainfall during each sampling interval, temperatures) supplied by the surveyor, may assist the Service and the Department in their decision whether or not to accept the data.

### **Contact Information:**

#### **[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#)**

For an application or guidance on how to obtain a Federal permit or for reporting, please contact:

For areas within the Great Valley hydrobasin:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office

Attn: Permit Coordinator 2800 Cottage Way, W-2605  
Sacramento, California 95825  
(916) 414-6547  
For hydrobasins south of and including Santa Cruz  
County:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Attn: Permit Coordinator  
Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office  
2493 Portola Road, Suite B Ventura, California 93003  
(805) 644-1766

<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/permits/>

Please refer to <http://www.fws.gov/ventura/areas/responsibilities.html> or  
[http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/sfwo\\_jurisdiction.htm](http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/sfwo_jurisdiction.htm) for a map showing U.S. Fish and Wildlife Office jurisdictions.

### **California Department of Fish and Game**

For Department reporting or questions regarding land use activity guidance, a map of regional offices and telephone numbers is available at <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/regions/regions.html>

For State of California Scientific Collecting permit applications and information, please contact:  
California Department of Fish and Game  
License and Revenue Branch  
3211 S Street  
Sacramento, California 95816  
(916) 227-2271

For additional State permit information, please refer to:

<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/hcpb/ceqacesa/ceqacesa.shtml> (How to Obtain a Scientific Collecting Permit)

<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/hcpb/ceqacesa/rsrchpermit/mou/whenneedmou.shtml> (When is the MOU Required?)

<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/licensing/pdffiles/fg1476.pdf> (Scientific Collecting Regulations)

<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/licensing/pdffiles/fg1379e.pdf> (Scientific Collecting Permit Attachment)