

Background, and Questions and Answers about the California red-legged frog:

The California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*) is the largest native frog in the western United States, ranging in size from 1.5 to 5 inches long. The bodies of adult females are approximately one inch longer than those of adult males.

The belly and hind legs of adult frogs are often red or salmon pink; the back is characterized by small black flecks and larger dark blotches on a background of brown, gray, olive or reddish-brown.

California red-legged frogs have been found from sea level to about 5,000 feet and may be found in a variety of habitats. The frogs breed in aquatic habitats such as streams, ponds, marshes and stock ponds. During wet weather, frogs may move through upland habitats. Frogs spend considerable time resting and feeding in riparian habitat. They eat mostly invertebrates, and they feed at night.

California red-legged frogs are relatively prolific breeders, usually laying egg masses during or shortly following heavy rainfall in late winter or early spring. The species breeds in aquatic habitats such as streams, ponds, marshes and stock ponds. Females can lay between 2,000 and 5,000 eggs in a single mass. The eggs are attached to bulrushes or cattails.

It takes six to 14 days for the eggs to hatch and approximately three and a half to seven months for the tadpoles to develop into frogs. The highest rates of mortality for this species occur during the tadpole stage: less than one percent of eggs hatched reach adulthood.

Young frogs hunt day and night. This constant activity makes them visible, and, consequently, more vulnerable to predators. Pacific tree frogs and California mice make up the majority of this species' diet, with insects composing the rest.

Historically, the California red-legged frog was found in 46 counties. The range extended coastally from the vicinity of Point Reyes National Seashore, Marin County, and inland from the vicinity of Redding, Shasta County, south to northwestern Baja California, Mexico. The frog has sustained a 70 percent reduction in its geographic range in California as a result of habitat loss and alteration, overexploitation, and introduction of exotic predators.

Today, only 26 counties support known populations. The California red-legged frog is found primarily in coastal drainages of central California. Monterey, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties support the greatest amount of currently occupied habitat. Only four areas within the entire historic range of this species may currently harbor more than 350 adults.

Q. Why is the California red-legged frog in trouble?

A. Over the last two decades, scientists have noted a widespread decline of frogs and other amphibian species, the causes of which aren't fully understood. The decline of the California red-legged frog is attributed to the spread of exotic predators such as bullfrogs, and changes that have fragmented habitat, isolated populations and degraded streams. Its decline signals a loss of diversity and environmental quality in wetlands and streams – which are essential to clean water and to the survival of most fish and wildlife species.

Amphibians worldwide appear to be on the decline. Amphibians are good "indicators" of significant environmental changes that may go initially undetected by humans. Humans breathe through lungs, which are inside their bodies and thus protected from direct contact with air and water. Amphibians, however, breathe partially (and in some species, completely), through their skin, which is constantly exposed to the environment. Their bodies are much more vulnerable and sensitive to factors such as disease, pollution, toxic chemicals, radiation and habitat destruction. The worldwide occurrences of amphibian declines and deformities may be an early warning to us of serious ecosystem imbalances.

Q. What is being done to save the California red-legged frog?

A. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the California red-legged frog as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in May 1996.

Recovery planning for this species began shortly after the 1996 listing. Species experts, State and Federal agency representatives, and stakeholders representing a variety of interests developed a comprehensive plan that is used as a blueprint to recover the species. A copy of the recovery plan is available at the Service's national Web site at <http://endangered.fws.gov/recovery/Index.html#plans>

The recovery plan details the actions necessary to achieve self-sustaining, wild populations of the frog so it will no longer require protection under the Endangered Species Act. The strategy for recovery involves protecting existing populations by reducing threats; restoring and creating habitat that will be protected and managed in perpetuity; surveying and monitoring populations and conducting research on the biology of, and threats to, the species; and reestablishing populations of the species within the historic range. A recovery plan is an advisory document. Cooperation from private property owners is voluntary.

Q. What is critical habitat?

A. Critical habitat is defined as specific areas that are essential to the conservation of a Federally listed species, and which may require special management considerations or protection. Critical habitat is determined using the best available scientific information about the physical and biological needs of the species.

These needs, or "primary constituent elements," include: space for individual and population growth and for normal behavior; food, water, light, air, minerals or other

nutritional or physiological needs; cover or shelter; sites for breeding, reproduction and rearing of offspring; habitat that is protected from disturbance or is representative of the historical geographic and ecological distribution of a species.

Q. What are primary constituent elements for the California red-legged frog?

A. The primary constituent elements for this species are aquatic and upland areas where suitable breeding and nonbreeding habitat is interspersed throughout the landscape and is interconnected by unfragmented dispersal habitat.

To be considered to have the primary constituent elements an area must include two or more suitable breeding locations, a permanent water source, associated uplands surrounding these water bodies up to 300 feet from the water's edge, all within 1.25 miles of one another and connected by barrier-free dispersal habitat that is at least 300 feet wide.

Q. Does the designation of critical habitat create preserves or provide species with more protection?

A. No. A critical habitat designation does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands and will not result in closure of the area to all access or use. Listed species and their habitats are protected by the Endangered Species Act whether or not they are in an area designated as critical habitat.

Q. What protection does the California red-legged frog receive as a listed species?

A. The Endangered Species Act forbids the import, export or interstate or foreign sale of protected animals and plants without a special permit. It also makes "take" illegal – forbidding the killing, harming, harassing, possessing or removing of protected animals from the wild. Federal agencies must consult with the Service to ensure that projects they authorize, fund or carry out aren't likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species, or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat.

Permits may be issued by the Service for activities that are otherwise prohibited under the Act, if these activities are for scientific purposes or to enhance the propagation or survival of the affected species, or for "take" that is incidental to otherwise lawful activities.

In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires that Federal agencies not only take action to prevent further loss of a species, but also pursue actions to recover species to the point where they no longer require protection and can be removed from the Endangered Species list.

Q. What were the findings of the economic analysis completed as part of the critical habitat designation process?

A. The Endangered Species Act requires the Service to prepare an economic analysis for any proposed critical habitat designation. The economic analysis identifies and analyzes the potential economic impacts that may result from the designation of critical habitat, above those impacts resulting from the listing of the species under the Act. A new analysis of the economic impacts of proposing critical habitat for California red-legged frog will be prepared in late 2004, with an expected release date in early 2005 for public review and comment.

The economic analysis for the previous final critical habitat established in 2001 concluded that some development companies may be affected by modifications to projects or incremental delays in the implementation of projects as a result of critical habitat designation. Certain ranching operations on Federal lands also may be affected on a small scale by minor adjustments to or reductions in grazing allotments. Small landowners may incur costs to determine whether their land contains primary constituent elements for the frog, may experience project delays and may experience temporary changes in property values as markets respond to the uncertainty associated with critical habitat designation.

Q. How will this designation of critical habitat affect Federal agencies that undertake, permit, or fund projects?

A. Section 7 of the Act requires Federal agencies to consult with the Service on actions they authorize, fund or carry out that may affect critical habitat. Through this consultation process, the Service can ensure that permitted actions don't change critical habitat in such a way that it no longer can meet the physical and biological needs of the species. The Service also analyzes actions to determine if they may adversely affect or jeopardize a listed species. The requirement to consult with the Service applies to all lands that have been identified as critical habitat where Federal agencies, permits or funding are involved.

Q. Are all 4.1 million acres critical habitat?

A. While the Service has designated approximately 4.1 million acres of critical habitat for the California red-legged frog, not all the areas within these broad boundaries contain the specific habitat features required by the frog, and thus, not all areas will require Federal agencies to consult with us. The Service will require consultations only where the physical and biological features necessary to the species' survival exist. For example, existing houses, shopping centers and similar development don't provide specific habitat for the frog, but are in some places within the proposed boundaries of the designation because of limitations in our ability to map the boundaries at a finer scale.

Q. What happens if my private property is designated critical habitat for the California red-legged frog?

A. The designation of critical habitat on privately-owned land doesn't mean the government wants to acquire or control the land. Activities on private lands that don't require Federal permits or funding aren't affected by a critical habitat designation. Critical habitat doesn't require landowners to carry out any special management actions or restrict the use of their land. However, the Act prohibits any individual from engaging in unauthorized activities that will actually harm listed wildlife. That prohibition is in effect for any Federally listed wildlife, with or without designated critical habitat.

If a landowner needs a Federal permit or receives Federal funding for a specific activity, the agency responsible for issuing the permit or providing the funds would consult with us to determine how the action may affect the California red-legged frog or its designated critical habitat.

Q. Is critical habitat designated for all listed species?

A No. The Act requires the Service to identify critical habitat at the time a species is listed. However, in some cases, designating critical habitat may be considered "not prudent" if it would cause harm to the species, such as increasing the possibility of collection or vandalism. Or the Service may find that such a designation is "not determinable" if it doesn't have enough information where a species is listed to define areas as critical habitat.

Q. Is the critical habitat designation for the California red-legged frog expected to negatively impact grazing?

A. Designation of critical habitat does not prescribe specific management actions, but does identify areas that are in need of special management considerations. In the case of grazing, the Service doesn't foresee any change in the ability of private landowners to graze livestock on their property. However, certain ranching operations occurring on Federal lands may be affected on a small scale by minor adjustments to or reductions in grazing allotments. In addition, the Service anticipates that many activities such as grazing, which presently occur in critical habitat areas, can be managed to be compatible with the frog's needs.

Where can I get more information about the California red-legged frog and this proposed critical habitat designation?

For general information, and for information about Alameda, Butte, Contra Costa, El Dorado, Fresno, Kern, Marin, Mariposa, Merced, Napa, Plumas, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Tehama, and Tuolumne Counties, contact Wayne White, Field Supervisor, Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2800 Cottage Way, Suite W. 2605, Sacramento, California 95825 (telephone 916/414-6600; facsimile 916/414-6712).

For information about Monterey, Los Angeles, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Ventura Counties, contact Diane Noda, Field Supervisor,

Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2394 Portola Road, Suite B, Ventura, California 93003 (telephone 805/644-1766; facsimile 805/644-3958).

For information about areas in the San Gabriel Mountains of Los Angeles County or Riverside and San Diego Counties, contact Jim Bartel, Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2730 Loker Avenue West, Carlsbad, California 92008 (telephone 760/431-9440; facsimile 760/431-9624).