

Cooperative plan from FWS to aid Yolo farmers

Safe harbor pact will also assist threatened snake, elderberry beetle

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed a Safe Harbor Agreement with Audubon California that will enable Yolo County farmers to help two imperiled species, while maintaining productive agricultural operations on 200,000 acres of privately owned riparian habitat.

The announcement opens a 30-day public comment period on the proposed agreement that would cover riparian habitat that is, or can be, habitat for the giant garter snake and the valley elderberry longhorn beetle, two species that are dependent on wetland and riparian habitat.

Both species have suffered significant population declines due to loss of habitat. The federal Endangered Species Act protects the species.

The agreement lays out farming-compatible management practices that also can benefit the species.

For the garter snake the practices include adequate water levels from early spring through mid fall, maintaining vegetation in aquatic habitat and uplands to provide escape cover and foraging habitat, and general care to not harm the species.

For the elderberry beetle, the practices include planting elderberry bushes where appropriate and fostering existing elderberry bushes in riparian habitat. Under the agreement, farmers would be assured that additional restrictions would not be imposed as a result of their voluntary conservation actions.

The announcement comes after a report in The Sacramento Bee that some rice farmers were halting field irrigation in order to rid the fields of the garter snake and avert the potential of having their property declared wetland areas. The practice has caused the amount of rice harvested to decline.

Officials at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are aware of the decline in rice growing in the Natomas basin.

However, Cay Goude, assistant field supervisor, reported that landowners are mistaken if they think drying up their land now will lessen the habitat set-aside requirements for them later on.

She noted that the habitat conservation plan adopted for development in the city of Sacramento's portion of Natomas required a half-acre to be set aside for every acre developed - regardless of whether the acre being developed was considered valuable habitat.

Regarding the safe harbor agreement, Vance Russell, director of Audubon California's Landowner Stewardship Program, said "This agreement supports the restoration and conservation we are doing private lands. In fact, it gives us another valuable tool to encourage landowners to conserve habitats while at the same time supporting agriculture."

Safe harbor pacts are voluntary cooperative agreements between landowners and the fish and wildlife service aimed at helping imperiled species while facilitating continued use of land by its owners.

With input from Yolo farmers, the proposed Yolo safe harbor pact was developed by the Service, Audubon California and Sustainable Conservation, a nonprofit organization that assists with the development of such agreements.

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