

Congressional Field Hearing  
6 August 2013  
Motherlode Fairgrounds  
Sonora, CA  
Sierra Building

Testimony offered by:  
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County of Tuolumne

Subject: US Fish and Wildlife proposal to list the Sierra Nevada Yellow-Legged Frog and the Yosemite Toad as endangered and threatened Species and to designate critical habitat to protect them.

**Talking Points:**

Good afternoon and thank you for being here in Sonora! And welcome to Tuolumne County. We all appreciate that you are holding this public hearing right here in the center of the affected area. It is also very nice to include the local individuals who are most impacted by the proposed actions of the US F&W.

First, it is without a doubt that the local economies of Tuolumne County and all the other Counties affected will be negatively impacted. This is not our first rodeo or encounter with these actions. By the way, before we get too far into this discussion, I want to be absolutely clear that we love the frogs and toads, all of them, whether they have yellow legs or not or have Yosemite as their namesake or not. We want them to thrive, but we want to thrive also. My testimony today is not intended to be “the frogs versus the people.”

In every case, the “protected” or “critical habitat” areas take valuable land out of economic production. (Chart 1) Notice the proposed “critical” habitat in TC represents 35% of the County and 24% of the total is in TC. Ouch! As a result, there will be a smaller timber harvest in the future, less cattle grazing, less recreational opportunity, and less fishing, hunting, rafting, and hiking. There will also be less cross country skiing, snowmobiling and snow shoeing. The list goes much further. We are a year round recreational playground and vacationland for people from all over the world. However, reduced access to our forests means less tourists of all types including eco-tourism opportunities. Lodging declines, dining declines, tourist shopping declines and the corresponding TOT and Sales Tax declines and consequently local government revenues and services to our people also declines. More businesses are on the threatened list. The highway and road infrastructure is already in sad shape and it will only get worse.

OK, so who needs tourists?! We in the rural counties do indeed need the tourists to survive. They are a vital part of our economic life. Tourism conservatively put close to \$50M or more in our local TC economy last year, including about \$4M in TOT and Sales tax.

We also need the jobs generated by the traditional heritage businesses to survive. Logging has declined for a long time. I believe it is a direct result of the USFS practicing an increased level of “active neglect.” Let’s look at the timber industry alone. We in TC have the best remaining infrastructure in California with two mills, a bark plant, a wood shavings plant, and two bio-mass power generating units. All of these are surviving, not thriving, on a plan of sustainable forest management on our private land and supplemented by the meager offerings of the USFS. We will get to that.

As an aside, our timber processing infrastructure is struggling to stay alive competitively. The image of “life support” comes to mind. The USFS policies have and continue to decimate the number of mills and support infrastructure all over our State. We are probably 10% of what we once were. The problem is once it is gone, it will be very difficult if not impossible to bring it back. Good forest management absolutely needs the wood products infrastructure. Nothing can or will happen without it. Our wood shavings plant has recently been intermittently operational due to lack of material.

We need to have a minimum annual harvest of 40MMBF in saw logs from the Stanislaus NF to keep our local plants operating year round and competitive. (Charts 2) More would be better! This year the USFS plan started at 12.5 MMBF in our SNF, or is it their forest? We badgered the USFS into 25 MMBF and with our Congressman’s help, we got to 33 MMBF only to have the Regional Forester back off to 24 MMBF saw logs and blame it on sequestration. (Chart 3) The annual mortality rate in the Stanislaus NF alone is on the order of 42 MMBF. Historically, we harvested well over 100MMBF annually and actual annual growth dramatically exceeds that number. (Chart 4) So the bottom line is: our mills are not as competitive as they could or should be. There are fewer timber jobs and the multiplier effect is real. There are fewer businesses surviving, not thriving, and now there are fewer people in our County. (Chart 5) We are losing our children and young families, so our schools have been in an enrollment decline for years. (Chart 6) The details are all in the charts you have before you. (Chart 7)

As we begin this look at our forest (Map 1), it is my expectation that the USFS will take the US F&W proposal and immediately take the proposed critical habitat areas out of their potential harvest area. You can see that in how they do things, in what I call the overlays. We start with the Forest; (Maps 2) then we go to the

Physically Suitable Forest; (Map 3) then we add the Mature Physically suitable Forest; (Map 4) we take out the designated wilderness areas and the Wild & Scenic River areas; and of course, (Map 5) the recommended (not yet designated) Wilderness and W&S rivers. Are we jumping the gun here? Congress has not yet designated this area but they might sometime in the future. Meanwhile, this area is off limits to any management. (Map 6) Now we take out the “Near Natural Areas”. I thought the whole forest was “natural” but some of it is only “near Natural”. (Map 7) Then they take out Special areas and more, (Map 8) they take out Owl and Goshawk PACS. There are a lot of those in our forest and they never go away even if the PAC species leaves. (Map 9) Furthermore, Old Forest emphasis Areas come out. (Map 10) Finally the WUI is considered. We do not have much left. And now we take 35% of my County out of the game. (Chart 8). Much of this area is already out in the prior maps but more productive land will be restricted. (Map 11) I promise you that the USFS will take the proposed areas for critical habitat out of the plan immediately if they have not already done so. (Map 12) The loss of timber production in the Stanislaus National Forest alone has conservatively taken well over \$100 M out of the local economies over the last 10 years. Imagine what that money would have done to our unemployment situation in this rural community. The interesting inconsistency here is we import the vast majority of wood products into California, like 80%. So if managing the forest and harvesting timber is bad locally, then why are we encouraging someone else to exploit their forest for our benefit? If it is bad in our forest, it must be bad somewhere else too. One more point here: while USFS does not manage our forests for lack of budget money, the USFS does have budget to procure more land so they can actively neglect even more valuable resources. The forests could financially support their own active management if we made it happen. There is no reason for this situation to exist.

Timber Harvest used to support our schools and road and highway infrastructure. Now we beg congress to renew the Secure Rural Schools Program every year to keep us afloat. The amount diminishes every year.

Now we also have a huge increased burden of public safety risk. Forest fires are a huge threat. Once started, fires are almost uncontrollable. Fire recognizes no boundaries or species of any kind. It destroys Critical habitat just like it destroys everything else. Fire is an equal opportunity aggressive destroyer. Even the Regional Forester will admit that in treated forest areas, they have a real advantage in fighting fires and can manage the situation. However, in the untreated areas, it becomes catastrophic quickly by getting into the crowns. As a result, we are seeing fire insurance be denied to our residences and vacation homes, or the rates are rising steeply. It is all based on aerial views of forest density in the area of homes and the ratings that the Insurance companies assign to specific areas. Forest density is at an all-time high. When that happens, the burden slowly drives more people out. This is a vicious downward spiral.

It gets worse. Our water delivery infrastructure is also threatened by increased fire risk as it is a historical, vulnerable, old wooden ditch and flume system. Replacing it in an emergency would be a logistic nightmare. Meanwhile, water would have to be manually hauled in from lower elevation sources at an immense cost. This risk is huge! I believe, and most foresters agree, that good forest management will yield substantially more water with higher quality in our streams, creeks, rivers and meadows.

There is more, traditional grazing, which is another of our historical businesses. The rules keep changing and every time they are reducing the available grazing in the high country. The ranchers are feeling increased financial stress, but the actions or

inactions of USFS and USF&W are also eliminating potential meadows. We are not doing meadow restoration at the level we need to maintain what we have. Good science says grazing actually supports the meadows and does not negatively impact the frogs and toads.

Hold it just a minute, I think meadows are where water is found and where frogs and toads thrive and multiply.

So where is the upside?! Our people are losing economically. Our County is losing economically. Our schools are in decline. The cost of living is going up. Our population is declining. We are geriatrifying our local society. People in rural mountain counties are not thriving – they are becoming endangered. Now we are threatened further by proposing to take more land out of production to protect the frogs. But I think the frogs and toads and other species are losing too. Let's find a way to protect the frogs and the people through good science and active forest management instead of neglect.

Locally, we are not giving up and we are not ready to abandon ship. We are ready to go to "General Quarters", because it is our lives, our families, our livelihoods our backyards and our wildlife that are at stake. We want it all and we once had it all. I believe active neglect is taking it away.

Thank you!