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Safe harbor program could help ranchers

By HEATHER HACKING - Staff Writer
Posted: 09/14/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

Cattle ranchers in the counties of Butte, Glenn, Tehama and Shasta counties, who are interested in providing wildlife habitat on their lands, may have a way to protect themselves from increased state and federal regulations if endangered or threatened species use the habitat.

It's called the Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement, and is proposed by the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game.

Other groups involved include the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the California Farm Bureau Federation, Environmental Defense Fund, Defenders of Wildlife and Sustainable Conservation.

The proposal is open for public comment through Sept. 29.

Rick Kuyper, safe harbor program director at the Sacramento Fish and Wildlife office, used the example of the Sacramento Valley elderberry longhorn beetle, which is listed as endangered. The beetle lives on elderberry bushes.

"People are hesitant to plant elderberry plants because they could have regulatory restrictions in the future," Kuyper said.

If that landowner was working with a conservation agency and had concerns about endangered species, "they could ask for a safe harbor agreement."

"There are a number of landowners working on restoration projects on their ranchland," Kuyper explained. "If they want to incorporate part of that to benefit listed species, this safe harbor agreement would help them."

While similar arrangements

exist elsewhere, the proposal for the four-county block is the largest area covered under such programs.

Kuyper said a similar agreement in Alameda County has a handful of landowners signed up, with a similar number in the Mokelumne River area.

Realistically, he said he could see about 20 agreements in the northern Sacramento Valley in the next decade, if the proposal is approved.

Kuyper said there are a number of agencies that have funding programs, including NRCS and Fish and Game.

The California Cattlemen's Association will be versed on how to help landowners with the process, he said.

Wildlife agencies will want to ensure the project has a net benefit to wildlife, he said.

"Agreements are all over the nation with a variety of species," including woodpeckers in Florida where people are able to harvest timber, while avoiding damage to

woodpeckers, he said.

"We (wildlife agencies) come out on top because people are keeping" habitat.

In the Mokelumne area, the agreements involve elderberry shrubs and landowners with vineyards.

"If elderberry plants pop up in the middle of the road or in a facility, normally they would ask us to remove the shrub." With the safe harbor agreement, "they can continue to work on their vineyard," Kuyper explained.

He said there is no financial incentive for the agreements.

Having the California Department of Fish and Game on board with the four-county proposal is pretty rare, Kuyper said.

Partners in the project are also pleased the northern Sacramento Valley proposal covers 20 listed species, which is a lot compared to other existing agreements.

Kim Delfino, program director for Defenders of Wildlife, said more than two years of work has occurred to get to this point.

She said the hope is the agreement will lead to "proactive projects," while addressing concerns of landowners.

She said landowners in the four counties might also have "a leg up" for conservation dollars in upcoming farm bills.

The program targets rangeland, and does not apply to any protections for fish.

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Comments should be addressed to Rick Kuyper, Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office, 2800 Cottage Way, W-2605, Sacramento, CA, 95825. Written comments may also be faxed to 1-916-414-6713. Notice of the application and the full draft proposal can be found at:

www.fws.gov/Sacramento.

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