

BAY AREA

Agency moves to protect goby fish

Endangered goby may get 10,000-acre designated habitat

- [Glen Martin, Chronicle Environment Writer](#)

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed designating more than 10,000 acres for the recovery of the tidewater goby, a small, brackish-water fish that once flourished in San Francisco Bay but is no longer found there.

The endangered goby inhabits some creeks and estuarine areas along California's coast, including Marin, San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties, which are included in the recovery plan.

The gray-brownfish rarely exceeds 2 inches in length and prefers slow-moving estuaries or tidal creeks with silt or sand bottoms. It has been driven to perilously low numbers over the course of several decades as a result of water diversions and sedimentation of estuaries and streams from development and cattle grazing.

Predation by larger fish and crayfish and displacement by non-native gobies -- which have invaded West Coast estuaries via ship ballast water -- also are considered likely causes of the goby's decline.

Environmentalists say the federal agency's decision is significant because it protects not just the goby but its home: California's salt marshes, which support a vast array of wild species and are critical nursery areas for fish and shellfish.

The designation of so-called "critical habitat" is required under the Endangered Species Act for any listed species as an essential component of recovery. Such a designation can affect land development or management, and has been a point of conflict pitting environmentalists against farmers, developers and timber companies.

The tidewater goby was listed as endangered in 1994 without critical habitat designation. Lois Grunwald, a spokeswoman for Fish and Wildlife, said the agency was not able to determine suitable habitat at the time of designation.

In 1998 and 1999, the Natural Resources Defense Council sued the agency in federal court, demanding critical habitat designations. Under a court order, the agency designated 1,600 acres as habitat in Orange and San Diego counties in 2000 but recommended taking the fish off the endangered list in northern portions of the state, where the agency thought the goby was holding its own.

The agency later retracted that position, leading to Tuesday's announcement that it seeks to add 10,003 acres of habitat designation in 12 counties.

Andrew Wetzler, a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the agency's decision is significant because it expands protection of some of the most biologically productive habitat in North America.

"These brackish estuaries that the goby calls home are the most endangered ecosystems in California," he said. "About 95 percent of them are gone. By protecting what's left, we're preserving an entire complex of sensitive species and saving some of the state's most beautiful and special places."

Public comments on the plan will be taken until early 2007, with a final decision on the goby's habitat expected within a year.

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