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San Mateo County approves garter snake protections

By Sierra Lopez Daily Journal staff
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A long-term effort to save the San Francisco garter snake slid forward following the county Planning Commission’s unanimous approval of an environmental enhancement project aimed at boosting the habitat of the endangered snake and its prey, the California red-legged frog.

“This project is not just a dot on a map,” Kellyx Nelson, executive director of the San Mateo Resource Conservation District, said. “We’re part of a lot of people working across the landscape to help a species come back from the brink of extinction.”

A partnership between the Peninsula Open Space Trust and the San Mateo Resource Conservation District intends to improve 16.7 acres of land where the San Francisco garter snake and California red-legged frog are known to exist.

The Butano Farms San Francisco Garter Snake Habitat Enhancement Project will occur within a 65-acre lot of undeveloped farmland in unincorporated Pescadero owned by POST, a land conservation agency. Dan Olstein, director of land stewardship, said researchers have known the land has a garter snake habitat for years and RCD has long had an interest in pursuing a project there.

“What’s great about the project is that it meets multiple goals as far as — first and foremost — enhancing the habitat for garter snakes and also grazing programming on the property,” Olstein said.

Amy Kaeser, project manager of the enhancement project, said the team will work to reduce woody encroachment into grassland, allowing better mobility for the snakes while controlling or eradicating invasive species.

Sediment will also be excavated from the bottom of an existing upland pond, creating a deep end for frogs to dive into when being stalked by prey, she said. The sediment will then go toward the creation of a basking bench, an area where snakes rest to digest in the sun.

“When it rains and creates the potential for small streams that’s going to stop and slow flow and prevent [pond] degrading,” Kaeser said.

Deeper ponds also provide frogs and snakes a longer range of time with access to quality wetlands, an issue RCD takes into each of its projects as climate warms in the region. Outside of this project, the agency also has a carbon sequestering project to help fight climate change, Nelson said.

Part of the project will be funded by the Pacific Gas & Electric to offset or mitigate environmental impacts from another company line inspection and upgrade associated with Millbrae’s Lomita Park Station Rebuild Project.

After reviewing the project, the county Planning Commission unanimously approved a Coastal Development Permit for the proposal, allowing work to begin this summer. Nelson noted work can only be done within a very specific window when the species are not highly mobile following a rainy season.

Preparation for the project has also been cumbersome when accounting for the number of permits and approvals the agency was required to receive including from the Planning Commission, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board and California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“It’s remarkably difficult to get habitat restoration projects done,” Nelson said. “Everything has to be lined up perfectly like dominos.”

The garter snake has been on California’s protected species list since the ’60s before the federal government and state formally adopted Endangered Species Acts, Nelson said. The Resource Conservation District has also been focused on garter snake habitat enhancement for decades, she said.

Protecting the species and the red-legged frog requires a focus on water and vegetation, Nelson said. While working to remove invasive plants, wetlands, particularly deep ponds, also need to be restored.

Much of the habitat work exists in the southern part of San Mateo County where man-made ponds built on farms in the 1960s have existed roughly 40 years beyond their intended life cycle, Nelson said.

“The thing that’s interesting about this work is that the vast majority of people have no idea how deliberately managed these lands are because it just looks like nature to them,” Nelson said. “In fact, a lot of thought goes into it to give these critters a fighting chance to survive.”

sierra@smdailyjournal.com

(650) 344-5200 ext. 106

