



## Alameda County's rancher and wildlife-friendly program restores ponds and helps rare animals

Most California ranchers consider themselves conservationists, and with good reason. The state's ranches offer important habitat not only for common wildlife species, but also for declining plants and animals. Now Alameda County ranchers who want to help conserve California's rich natural heritage are getting some much-needed assistance themselves. The innovative Wildlife-friendly Pond Restoration Program offers interested landowners a menu of incentives to help them restore habitat for two declining animals, the California red-legged frog and the California tiger salamander.

The Wildlife-friendly Pond Restoration Program was launched in 2006. Seven ranchers signed up before the year's end, and for every enrolled rancher, several more have shown interest. The program is offered by a partnership that includes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Alameda County Resource Conservation District and Environmental Defense's Center for Conservation Incentives.

"We ranchers do want to help wildlife on our land—it's our natural heritage," says Connie Jess, one of the first ranchers to enroll. "What we don't want are big expenses, time-consuming red tape and more legal restrictions on our business operations. This program works for me because it lets me fix my pond without new Endangered Species Act restrictions on what I can do on my property. Our local RCD and NRCS work with me, taking me through the permitting and helping with the technical issues."

### Finding homes for two rare California amphibians

Both the California red-legged frog and California tiger salamander are an important part of California's rich

wildlife heritage and found only in the state for which they are named. The frog is believed to have inspired Mark Twain's famous story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Both animals were once common in much of California, but agriculture and development have altered or destroyed most of their habitat. After a long slide toward extinction, the frog and salamander were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

When natural pond and wetland breeding habitat

became scarce, the frog and salamander found new breeding sites—artificial ponds that ranchers built for watering livestock. However, this solution isn't permanent: these manmade ponds have a limited lifespan and are deteriorating.

Alameda County has about 700 livestock watering ponds. Most were built about 50 years ago, and after decades of sedimentation and erosion no longer serve their original purpose. Many ranchers would like to maintain them for their beauty and the wildlife they attract, and as important parts of family history on the land. But restoration costs—both financial and regulatory—can be prohibitive. Thus ranchers often turn reluctantly to more modern, cost-effective livestock watering sources like tanks, troughs and solar-powered pumps. The ranchers lose an attractive landscape feature, and the frog and salamander lose a home.

### Helping ranchers restore wildlife-friendly ponds

The Wildlife-friendly Pond Restoration Program offers Alameda County ranchers cost-share funding for pond restoration specifically designed to benefit the frog and the salamander, as well as technical assistance to get the job done. The program streamlines the regulatory hurdles with "one-stop shopping" for restoration permits.

Recovery of two of California's rarest animals may depend on voluntary help from ranchers.



Ranchers no longer need apply to six offices for the required permits, but simply go to a single agency. The approval wait time that was once up to a year or more now averages about 60 days.

Another benefit available to landowners is regulatory assurances. Ranchers who restore ponds for the red-legged frog and tiger salamander are eligible for the Alameda County Stockpond Safe Harbor Agreement. If they enroll, they get legal assurances that their good deeds on behalf of these amphibians will not result in additional Endangered Species Act restrictions on their property.

All enrollees in Alameda County's pond restoration program receive cost-share funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, a Farm Bill conservation program. Ranchers who take extra steps to make ponds "wildlife-friendly" receive extra payments from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Coastal Conservancy, as well as additional Farm Bill funds to defray the expense of ongoing habitat management. As well as fixing their ponds, these ranchers are improving amphibian habitat by planting vegetation, managing grazing and controlling non-native predators. The wildlife-friendly management extends hundreds of acres around each restored pond so that frogs and salamanders find good habitat when they leave the ponds each summer. These efforts are addressing one of the

EQIP program's nationwide priorities, helping at-risk wildlife species.

### Extending the program's benefits

The Wildlife-friendly Pond Restoration Program team plans to give Alameda County ranchers over \$700,000 to restore 28 ponds in the next five years. With the acreage

around each pond, local ranchers will be voluntarily managing over 5,000 acres to help the two threatened amphibians. The program's benefits may also go beyond the county, as the program is well-suited for adoption elsewhere in the range of the California red-legged frog and California tiger salamander. Its broad range of incentives

may even inspire similar programs for other species.

"Landowners' enthusiastic response to this program is very encouraging," said Terry Huff of the NRCS. "We expect more Alameda County landowners to enroll, and with similar programs elsewhere in the state, we can make substantial progress toward recovering both the frog and the salamander."

The Wildlife-friendly Pond Restoration Program exemplifies a growing nationwide trend toward cooperative partnerships. As landowners, government agencies and conservation organizations work together to advance the recovery of declining species, financial, technical and regulatory incentives programs are playing a key role.

Frog photo ©Joyce Gross; all other photos courtesy Alameda County Conservation Partnership.

"It would have been a long time before we could have afforded the repair on our own. And as farmers and ranchers, we don't know how to deal with the permitting. This program made it possible. I'm just glad the pond is back. I like it, and the wildlife like it. It satisfies the salamanders, the frogs. And the ducks are back after being gone for years. I don't know if we could be any happier."  
—Rancher Connie Jess



## Enrolling in the Wildlife-friendly Pond Restoration Program

Landowners who want to find out more about the program can call the NRCS/Resource Conservation District office at 925-371-0154, extension 114.



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