

**SANTA BARBARA COUNTY
BOARD AGENDA LETTER**



Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
105 E. Anapamu Street, Suite 407
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 568-2240

Agenda Number:
Prepared on: 3/2/06
Department Name: General Services
Department No.: 063
Agenda Date: 3/14/06
Placement: Administrative
Estimate Time: 2 hours on 3/28/06
Continued Item: No
If Yes, date from:

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Michael F. Brown
County Executive Officer

STAFF CONTACT: Bob Nisbet, Director (568-2626)
General Services Department

SUBJECT: Regional Conservation Strategy
Third, Fourth and Fifth Supervisorial Districts

Recommendations:

That the Board of Supervisors set a hearing for Tuesday, March 28, 2006, (2 hours) to receive a Staff Report detailing findings and recommendations for the development of a Regional Conservation Strategy to protect the California Tiger Salamander (CTS) and provide relief to property owners impacted by its listing as an endangered species. As addressed in the Staff Report (attached), the Board will be asked to consider the following recommendations:

- a) Adopt the method of a Conservation Strategy similar to Sonoma County's approach, in the pursuit of a regional habitat conservation strategy limited to the range of the CTS, but with the requirement that the approach be re-evaluated before development of a Memorandum Of Understanding with wildlife agencies, or other implementation effort;
- b) Authorize staff, in partnership with the US Fish & Wildlife and the City of Santa Maria, to develop a Conservation Strategy Team structure for consideration by the Board at a later hearing, and;
- c) Approve a budget revision in the amount of \$130,000 for additional staff and consulting costs, to be released from the Vehicle License Fee Gap Loan.

Executive Summary and Discussion

Since its listing as an endangered species nearly five years ago, wildlife agencies have sought to protect Santa Barbara County's California Tiger Salamander (CTS) in accordance with federal and state law. The result has been a slow and expensive patch-work of protection and mitigation efforts on a project-specific basis. This approach has provided less than satisfactory protection to the population of the CTS in the county, and less than satisfactory ability of land owners to use their property in an otherwise legal manner. To remedy this, the County of Santa Barbara has pursued a method to establish a long-term conservation program to protect endangered species and mitigate effects of future development in the range of the CTS, and to do so in a manner that achieves the following goals:

1. Protection of stakeholders' (public and private) land use interests;
2. Predictability and streamlined processes in land use permitting within the range, and;
3. Economic viability in its implementation.

A process has been in place for decades that, when designed and implemented regionally and appropriately, has achieved the stated goals. It is called the Habitat Conservation Plan, or HCP, sanctioned in the federal Endangered Species Act. All too often it has not been implemented well and thus has a spotted reputation. Recently a new approach has emerged that appears to offer a solution providing the same level of protection to the species but achieved faster and for less cost. It is the approach in preparation by the County of Sonoma. Although this new approach has some potential disadvantages, including more risk to legal challenges, less commitment from wildlife agencies and less grant money available for its implementation, its advantages of lower development cost and time appear to outweigh the disadvantages.

It is recommended that the Board of Supervisors adopt the "Conservation Strategy" approach being employed in Sonoma to protect the species within the previously established CTS Range of 190,000 acres, and that a team of local jurisdictions, stakeholders, and regulating agencies be assembled for its development. Sonoma has recently improved the structure of its team by establishing a policy oversight committee subject to the Brown Act, and it is recommended that the Santa Barbara team consider this same structure.

The Regional Conservation Strategy would include development of a biological framework, species description, mitigation, implementation and funding. Implementation of the plan would include long-term development of a CTS preserve area, as identified by the biological framework. It is conceivable the preserve could be more than 10,000 acres at full build-out. While that may seem large, the cost to establish it (est. up to \$6 million per year over 30 years) is estimated to be less than the current cost of mitigation for building development, when considered long-term (est. up to \$8 million per year over 30 years).

Finally it is recommended \$130,000 be approved this fiscal year to initiate the project. An estimated \$420,000 would be needed next fiscal year, but it is recommended that expenditures in out-years be evaluated by the Board at strategic milestones of the project. It is estimated the plan can be completed in less than four years for a total cost of about \$1.4 million.

Subject: Regional Conservation Strategy

Agenda Date: 3/14/06

Page 3

Mandates and Service Levels:

US Federal Endangered Species Act and State of California Endangered Species Act, among others.

Fiscal and Facilities Impacts:

1. The estimate of costs to the County for FY 05/06 is \$130,000 for additional staff and specialty consultant costs. The proposed funding source is from the VLF Gap Loan.

Special Instructions:

Please publish in Santa Barbara Newspress and Santa Maria Times 10 days prior to hearing.

Upon approval, please forward the Minute Order to Grady Williams, Facilities Services Division, General Services Department.

Board letter and Staff Report prepared by Grady Williams, P.E., Project Manager.