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[Reviewing the Toad](#)

-- [ROB DAVIS](#)

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed today to start reviewing whether it should designate large swaths of land in San Diego County as critical habitat for the arroyo toad, a small endangered amphibian found throughout coastal California.

The agreement comes almost a year after the federal wildlife agency acknowledged that Julie MacDonald, a political appointee, had inappropriately manipulated an earlier decision about what land should be protected to ensure the endangered toad's recovery.

While the agency acknowledged interference in July 2007 -- part of a scandal that forced MacDonald from office -- it had not taken steps to revisit the decision. That drew [a lawsuit](#) from the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that today signed the agreement compelling action.

The agreement requires the service to propose new habitat by October 2009; a final decision is due by October 2010.

"One of the most disturbing things about this history is the fact that the agency itself admitted the decision was tainted last year but has done nothing to establish new critical habitat or put a stop to projects harming sensitive rivers and streams that are home to the species," said David Hogan, the environmental group's conservation manager. "This case is indicative of years of abuse by the Bush Administration of the Endangered Species Act."

The decision could have significant impacts in San Diego County. Critical habitat, as it is known, is land that is designated as vital to the recovery of an endangered species. In 2000, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to protect 478,000 acres -- including large tracts of land in San Diego County along the San Diego, Sweetwater and San Luis Rey rivers.

By the time the decision was made final in 2005, the service designated 11,695 acres -- about 2 percent of its original proposal.

Creed Clayton, a Fish and Wildlife Service official, noted the political interference at the time in an [internal e-mail](#), saying, "It seems to me that the era of erring on the side of the species is clearly over."

Designating the critical habitat does not offer absolute protection to land. It does, however, offer protections from harm induced by federal activities.