

# Toad Jumps in the Way of Development

The Signal News, August 12, 2004 by Brandon Lowrey

County planners Wednesday added a rare toad to a list of environmental concerns surrounding a planned 2,500-home development near San Francisquito Creek.

The amended West Creek project still requires approval from planners and county supervisors before construction could begin.

A Newhall Land and Farming Co. executive said the county's approval process was halted last May when western spadefoot toads crept down into a man-made basin — a "footprint" for the 966-acre project — and were discovered there.

"It wasn't a natural area for them," Newhall Land spokeswoman Marlee Lauffer said. "This is a situation where it was clearly a temporary basin we had created, and the toads had gone down to that area."

The toads are classified by federal agencies as a "species of concern," meaning they're threatened, but not severely enough to be classified as endangered.

Urban and agricultural development is primarily responsible for destroying their habitat throughout California and Baja California, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Local environmentalists scoffed at the notion that the toads weren't native to the West Creek site.

"They didn't grow wings and fly there," said local environmental activist Teresa Savaikie. "It only makes sense that if you destroy their natural habitat, they're going to make use of whatever habitat is available to them."

Planners expressed their intent to approve the amended plan, with measures to soften the blow to the toads, once it's finalized.

"I believe (Newhall Land is) going to provide a habitat for the western spadefoot toad, and they would be working with the resource agencies to make that happen," said Frank Meneses, a county planning administrator.

The 1 1/2- to 2 1/2-inch-long western spadefoot toad ranges from gray to green in skin color, has gold-colored cat-like eyes, and has bumps on its skin that are often capped with red or orange. It feeds on a variety of insects and worms, and its call sounds like a hoarse, one-second snore, according to the federal Fish and Wildlife Web site.

Low-frequency noise vibration disturbs the toads, as they are "extremely sensitive to such stimuli, which cause them to break dormancy and emerge from their burrows," the site says. That, in turn, can cause death or reduced productivity.

Homes in West Creek, planned for the area near Copper Hill Road in the vicinity of Rio Norte Junior High School, could be on the market by the end of next year, Lauffer said.