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## Conservation Groups file lawsuit to protect endangered Placer County vernal pool grasslands

(Sacramento, CA) – On Friday, November 18, 2004, the Butte Environmental Council and Defenders of Wildlife filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over the federal agencies' failure to protect endangered vernal pool grasslands in Placer County. Both BEC and Defenders are challenging the Service's approval of the proposed Westpark/Fiddymment Ranch because the project will destroy more than 2,400 acres of vernal pool grasslands that the Service has already designated as essential to the recovery of endangered vernal pool species.

“Vernal pools are wetland wonders in special California grasslands,” said Barbara Vlamis, Executive Director of Butte Environmental Council. “It is imperative that the federal agencies responsible for protecting this endangered landscape actually protect these areas. Otherwise, they will be simply managing species into extinction.”

Vernal pools are seasonal wetlands that fill with water during fall and winter rains. These unique grasslands once dotted most of California's Central Valley and southern California coastal areas and are home to a unique array of plants and wildlife that can be found nowhere else on earth. Biologists estimate that more than 90 percent of vernal pools have been destroyed throughout their historic range. The vernal pool tadpole shrimp and the vernal pool fairy shrimp were listed as endangered in 1994 due to habitat loss and fragmentation from urban expansion, agriculture, roads, and water projects. The Fish and Wildlife Service designated critical habitat for these species in 2003. “Critical habitat” for threatened and endangered species is considered to be habitat necessary for the recovery of the species, and, as such, is intended to have a higher degree of protection.

The proposed Westpark/Fiddymment Ranch project is on 3,142 acres in western Placer County. The project will eliminate 2,436 acres of vernal pool critical habitat.

“Ironically, the Service has given the green light to a project that will eliminate one of the largest remaining intact vernal pool grassland areas in Placer County – an area the Service identified as essential for the recovery of California's vernal pool species in its recently released draft recovery plan,” said Kim Delfino, California Program Director, Defenders of Wildlife. “Only last week, the Service touted this draft recovery plan. That plan is not worth the paper it's printed on if the agency refuses to look at whether a project such as this one will undermine the recovery of endangered vernal pool species.”

The Westpark/Fiddymment Ranch project is part of the West Roseville Specific Plan, which was challenged earlier by conservation groups for violating the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The parties to that suit announced a settlement in August 2004. The CEQA suit never

addressed the issue of whether or not the agencies violated the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act when it approved the Westpark/Fiddymont Ranch project and the destruction of nearly 2,500 acres of vernal pool critical habitat.

“Sacramento and Placer counties’ native grasslands are under siege from urban sprawl, destroying the very attributes that lured people to the area,” said Vlamis. “The Bush Administration must allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to live up to its mandate to recover endangered species and evaluate whether or not this project, in its current form, will be consistent with recovery.”