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Garn to be briefed on spotted frog's effect on CUP

By JUDY FAHYS
Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been called on to brief Utah Sen. Jake Garn on how a tiny frog might affect the final leg of the massive Central Utah Project.

A tentative briefing was scheduled for next week in Washington between the agency's Denver assistant regional director Bob Jacobsen, Garn, his staff and other congress-

sional figures. A top item on the agenda is to be what role the fast-disappearing spotted frog, which is under consideration for study as an endangered species, might play in shaping the project.

"The question is, if the species is listed, will the Bonneville unit of the Central Utah Project be affected?" Jacobsen said. "We don't know that now."

Garn's office requested the meeting after a congressional briefing

two weeks ago on projects that were being held up because of endangered wildlife. Since then, Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan has criticized the 1973 Endangered Species Act for pitting development against the environment.

The threat of an endangered species hanging over CUP could prove another headache in the Utah congressional delegation's efforts to win a \$750 million increase in the spending ceiling for completing the

system. Negotiations are now under way to get backing for the project from the Bush administration and key members of Congress.

The spotted frog has a broad range that includes an area from Nevada, through Utah, Montana, Idaho and Washington state to Alaska, but its numbers are falling fast, according to a petition filed with the Fish and Wildlife Service by University of Utah biologist Peter Hovingh, a research associate at

the college.

Hovingh first raised concerns about the frog last year, and the wildlife agency saw enough merit in his arguments to study them further. Jacobsen said the agency will decide this summer whether or not the frog should be proposed for listing as an endangered or threatened species.

Hovingh said when people build dams and bridges and highways
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and other urban development, "all these have contributed to (the frogs) decline."

"In the Wasatch range, they went from being very numerous in the 1960s and 1970s to zero."

According to Hovingh, there appears to only be two remaining populations adding up to less than a dozen.

"As all this is happening, no one is paying attention to these frogs," he said, adding that he had been asking for surveys of the population for years.

But Jacobsen contends the main threat to the frog appears to be nature rather than development. The leopard frog and the bullfrog are blamed for decreases in spotted frog populations, Jacobsen said.

"Generally, everywhere the bullfrog has been introduced, the spotted frog population has declined," Jacobsen said.

The frog thrives in the cold waters of rivers, lakes, springs and wetlands. Locally, it can be found in Utah Lake and the Provo River.

Jacobsen's office is collecting data from field offices, state wildlife agencies, universities and amphibian experts who can help determine the extent of the spotted frog decline. Assuming the frog is in trouble, the agency must see how its habitat and further CUP construction overlap and whether there are ways to ease pressure on the frog's habitat.

"Before we could make a judgment about whether or not CUP would be affected, we would need to do some studies to see what features of the project would impact the species habitat," Jacobsen said.

Even in the case that the frog might become a factor in the project, it would be "premature to think that the frog would stop a megabuck project," Jacobsen said.

"Usually we can find ways short of all out stopping the project without endangering the species," he said.