



In Our View - Flawed Protection

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Columbian editorial writers

Here's one endangered species that needs to become extinct: HR 3824, a bill passed Thursday by the House of Representatives that would reform the 32-year-old Endangered Species Act.

Few people would dispute that the ESA, though successful in many cases, needs to be reformed. But the measure that was passed by the House on a 229-193 vote is full of flaws. The bill faces a rough road in the Senate, where Sen. Lincoln Chafee, R-R.I., has doubts that it will pass in its current form. Among the bill's flaws:

- * Alarming haste Representatives had fewer than two days to review this massive, 24-section bill before having to vote on it. Earlier, it sped through the process at a frightening pace, having been introduced on Sept. 19 and advanced from committee eight days later. This process typically takes months. What's the rush? Something to hide?

- * The bill allows non-scientists even worse, political appointees to make scientific decisions about habitat designations. Ask hurricane victims about political appointees making key decisions. If scientists cannot designate habitat where a dwindling population lives, then endangered species have little chance of survival.

- * The bill would require the government to compensate property owners if steps needed to protect species thwarted development plans. That's a noble intent, but it creates an entitlement program. To its credit, the bill also contains a better solution, conservation grants for private landowners. The grants would promote voluntary conservation of endangered species and threatened species. But according to U.S. Rep. Brian Baird, D-Vancouver, it's difficult to ascertain in the bill where the description of the grants stops and the description of the entitlement program begins.

"I know there is room for common-sense ESA reform that is both responsible and constructive," Baird said, but "the changes proposed in this bill will destroy the habitats endangered animals need to survive."

Not according to U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, chairman of the House Resource Committee that triggered the bill's breakneck passage. "You've got to pay when you take away somebody's private property. That is what we have to do," said the California rancher. "The only way this is going to work is if we bring in property owners to be part of the solution and to be part of recovering those species."

The ESA has drawn mixed reviews. According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, only nine species have gone extinct since President Nixon signed the 1973 law. On the other hand, only 1 percent of 1,300 species ever listed have recovered.

The Senate should take this matter back to two basics upon which everyone agrees: endangered species deserve protection and scientifically designed paths to recovery, and the ESA certainly can be improved. Then, the Senate should recognize that landowners and developers should not be allowed to turn the issue into an entitlement. The best way to do that is with conservation grants.

Such a strategy in the Senate would be appreciated by grizzly bears, whooping cranes, blue whales and the American bald eagle, 6,000 pairs of which now thrive in the lower 48 states, prompting a promotion 10 years ago from "endangered" to "threatened." The bird symbolizes more than America. It's a manifestation of the success that's possible in the Endangered Species Act.