The Obama administration announced today that federal agencies will once again be required to undergo an independent scientific review if they embark on projects that might affect threatened or endangered species, marking yet another reversal of a last-minute Bush administration environmental regulation.

In mid-December, former Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne issued a rule allowing government agencies to decide on their own whether a project would harm an imperiled plant or animal without consulting with either the Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, depending on the species. At the time, Kempthorne said the move would streamline the bureaucratic process without harming protected species.

President Obama called for a review of the rule last month. Today, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Kempthorne’s successor, and Commerce Secretary Gary Locke said in a joint statement that scientific evidence justified restoring the independent reviews that Fish and Wildlife and NOAA had conducted for decades.

“By rolling back this 11th hour regulation, we are ensuring that threatened and endangered species continue to receive the full protection of the law,” Salazar said. “Because science must serve as the foundation for decisions we make, federal agencies proposing to take actions that might affect threatened and endangered species will once again have to consult with biologists at the two departments.”

Business leaders -- especially those most affected by the Endangered Species Act, such as those in home construction -- questioned why Salazar and Locke bypassed a more extended rulemaking process in reinstating a heavy regulatory burden on industry.

Joe Robson, a builder and developer in Tulsa, Okla., who chairs the National Association of Home Builders, said the Bush administration went through a lengthy public comment process and now the parties involved are “back to square one.”

“On a ‘good government’ level, today’s action is regrettable in that this administration is rushing to revoke a legally issued federal rule without public notice and comment, using a little-known and unpopular provision of the recent omnibus appropriations bill to change a federal regulation. The appropriate way to make significant changes to a federal regulation is to allow for notice and comment,” he said. “Instead, the secretaries of Commerce and Interior were given the authority to unilaterally change the law. That’s hardly an argument for consensus or transparency.”

Environmentalists welcomed the administration’s move, but suggested it still needs to roll back a last-minute rule Kempthorne issued that instructs Interior not to take into account impacts on the polar bear, federally listed as threatened, that occur outside its range, such as greenhouse gas emissions.

“Secretary Salazar took an important step today toward restoring needed protections for endangered species,” said Noah Greenwald, biodiversity program director for the advocacy group Center for Biological Diversity. Still, he called for the administration “to rescind the special rule for the polar bear, which amounts to a death sentence for the majestic bear by exempting greenhouse gas emissions from regulation.”