CLIMATE CHANGE

Judge Orders More Timely U.S. Reports

A U.S. federal judge has rejected the Bush Administration’s sluggish approach to reporting the results of its $1.7 billion climate-research effort. But even researchers critical of the government’s climate-science program say it’s a hollow victory for those seeking meaningful information on how global change affects the nation.

Last year, environmental groups led by the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Arizona, sued the Administration, claiming that it had ignored a 1990 law that calls for “an assessment” of climate-change research every 4 years that “integrates, evaluates, and interprets” the latest research and describes its impact on the country. Noting that the government is nearly 3 years late in delivering such an assessment and 1 year late on a related mandatory research plan, Judge Saundra Brown Armstrong of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California rejected the Bush Administration’s argument that the deadlines were flexible enough to allow the delays. “The defendants have not adhered to the text of the statute or its mandates,” Armstrong wrote in her 21 August ruling, adding that the research plan should be released in March 2008 and the assessment in May.

Not surprisingly, the Administration and its opponents interpreted the decision quite differently. The White House science office says the new deadlines are “consistent with the Administration’s current plans,” although it is considering an appeal. But Senator John Kerry (D–MA) and Representative Jay Inslee (D–WA) say the ruling shows that officials have been “illegally suppressing” scientific facts and “crippling this country’s ability to respond to the global warming threat.”

At the same time, the judge did not address the planned form of the Administration’s analysis, an issue on which she said Congress has not “clearly dictated.” In 2000, the Clinton Administration summarized hundreds of studies on possible climate impacts in a 600-page report based on years of consultation with hundreds of scientists and local officials. In the place of this single, integrated report, the Bush Administration’s interagency Climate Change Science Program (CCSP) has opted to write 21 shorter reports on various aspects of climate change, six of which it says fulfill the law’s requirement. The first report was issued last year; a second one came out in June.

Richard Moss, who ran the climate change office under Bush until 2006, called it “unfortunate” that the ruling criticized the timing of the reports but failed to force CCSP to integrate its findings. “The Administration should be held to a higher standard than just what a judge finds follows the letter of the law,” says Moss, adding that Americans deserve a “full soup-to-nuts national assessment” of how climate change will impact them. A bill that would force such an integrated approach passed the House of Representatives last month and is pending in the Senate.

–ELI KINTISCH

ENDANGERED SPECIES

U.S. Announces Recovery Plan for a Ghost Bird

Find them. That’s the top priority in the effort to save the ivory-billed woodpecker, outlined in a draft plan last week by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). But many critics fear that the charismatic bird is already extinct and worry that the $27 million plan will mean less money for conserving other endangered species.

Ivorybills (Campephilus principalis) were on the original federal list of endangered species in 1967. The last confirmed sightings of the large woodpeckers were in Louisiana in 1944. But in 2005, a team led by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology announced that it had evidence that at least one male was alive and flapping in Arkansas, a stunning claim that has since attracted vigorous skepticism (Science, 17 August, p. 888). Right after the announcement, FWS convened experts to figure out how to help the species bounce back.

The 182-page plan offers a detailed list of activities, many of which FWS is already either conducting or funding. The main task is to expand the search for the birds, now done mainly by a few academics, volunteers, and state wildlife agencies. Also high on the list are characterizing its habitat and developing computer models to project a healthy population size. These efforts, plus managing habitat, would cost $27.8 million over 5 years.

That price tag, in an era of scarce resources, makes some biologists shudder. “We put other species more at risk by focusing on a bird we can’t find,” says Louis Bevier, an ornithologist and research associate at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. FWS estimates it will have spent $1.1 million this year on the ivorybills, compared with a median expenditure in 2004 of $5500 per threatened or endangered species.

Chris Elphick of the University of Connecticut, Storrs, says the recovery plan gives short shrift to those who question the recent sightings in Arkansas. But FWS’s Laurie Fenwood, who coordinates the recovery effort, says that the evidence was strong enough to compel the agency to act.

The plan is open for public comment until 22 October and will be reviewed by The Wildlife Society, a nonprofit scientific group in Bethesda, Maryland. A final version of the plan should be ready next year. And don’t accuse FWS bureaucrats of negative thinking: If all goes well, the report says, the ivory-billed woodpecker could come off the endangered species list in 2075.

–ERIK STOKSTAD