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Opinion

J.F. - House passes reckless bill to endanger species

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Anyone really believe that House Resources Chairman Richard Pombo of California, and Rep. Butch Otter of Idaho, support Pombo's revisions to the Endangered Species Act to improve those species' chances of avoiding extinction? If so, there's a former television weatherman in Pocatello waiting to tell you where killer storms like Katrina and Rita come from.

Few members of Congress have greater records of hostility to environmental regulation than Pombo and Otter. Pombo wrote the book on it, titled "This Land is Our Land: How to End the War on Private Property." And Otter battled publicly with the Environmental Protection Agency after he altered wetlands at his Boise Valley ranch.

The bill they support appears to protect one species, *Homo sapiens*, at the expense of all others. But even that isn't an accurate description, because taxpaying human beings could easily become victims of the legislation that was rushed through the House Thursday. Here's how:

Pombo has a legitimate gripe with the current act's power to tell private property owners what they may not do with their land that is designated as "critical habitat" for a dwindling plant or animal, without compensation. That is an extreme provision that deserves modification.

Pombo's bill is not that modification, however. It is the opposite extreme, a requirement that the federal government pay property owners "full market value" for any development plan it hinders.

That is an invitation for every fast-buck artist to devise the most elaborate proposal he can think of in the knowledge that he needn't move a shovelful of earth to cash in. As New York Republican Sherwood Boehlert points out, the bill "would open the federal purse to developers."

"Reforming the law should not be a euphemism for gutting the law, and that's exactly what the bill would do," he says.

So what should be done to make less burdensome a law that has, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, helped 16 species recover enough to be removed from the endangered species list? That's a good question — one deserving of a good deal of deliberation and debate.

That's just what it did not get under Pombo's direction. He pushed this bill through his committee in two days, and a floor vote was scheduled a week later, on a day the House was abuzz with talk not of plants and critters facing extinction but of a majority leader just indicted and removed from leadership.

Fortunately, the bill now goes to a chamber more committed to deliberation and debate, the Senate. There, perhaps cooler heads than Pombo's and Otter's can find a way to deal property owners into the common goal of biodiversity without dealing plants and animals out. — J.F.