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Local Leaders, Environmental Interests Laud Endangered Species Act

By Jim Becker, News 13 Reporter

Both supporters and opponents of the Endangered Species Act say life would be drastically different here in southern Arizona without it.

The Bush Administration and some members of Congress say they want to reform the act, while Pima County promises to live by it.

Miss Liberty is a 17-year-old Bald Eagle, listed as an endangered species and now making a comeback.

"Habitat has been protected," explains Joe Miller of Liberty Wildlife Rehabilitation. "Federal agencies have been set up to make sure that these guys are not harassed or harmed in any way."

Critics of the Endangered Species Act charge that the law hasn't been as effective at protecting animals like Miss Liberty as it at, perhaps, holding up much needed school space. One example, Ironwood Ridge high school opened two years behind schedule, and the Amphitheater School District agreed to purchase an additional 30 acres of land to provide a buffer.

Critics accuse the endangered Pygmy Owl of holding things up.

"That really wasn't what it was all about," said Scotty Johnson of Defenders of Wildlife. "There were other places to build a school. There was other land available to build a school, but nobody talked about that part of the issue."

In all, there are 23 endangered or threatened species in Pima County. Now, the county says it's land use policies will follow lock step with the Endangered Species Act, even going beyond.

Because of the Endangered Species Act, Pima County has adopted strict ordinances, not only aimed at protecting critical habitat, but also, protecting the scenic beauty of the desert.

For example, you can't build a house on peaks or ridges.

The county is also buying up land, an example, Rancho Seco south of Tucson earlier this year. Supporters of the county's desert conservation plan say buying the land protects an important wildlife corridor, a key characteristic of the endangered species act.

As a county supervisor, Raul Grijalva worked to establish Pima County's desert conservation plan. Now, as a member of Congress, he's resisting attempts to change the endangered species act. He says the act can work better if congress provides money needed to make it work.

"If we need to work on reforming the endangered species act, the work should be around what resources help," says Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat. "How do we streamline? How do we make the process move more effectively and efficiently?"