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Politics rule battle over ESA

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The Endangered Species Recovery Act of 2005 is creating quite the furor on Capitol Hill, and elsewhere, having recently passed the House by a vote of 229-193.

Now headed for the Senate, the ESRA is worth keeping an eye on.

If passed, the measure would bring about sweeping changes in the 30-year-old law designed to protect plant and animal species in the U.S. at risk of extinction .

The most significant change would be the elimination of the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service's authority to designate specific regions as "critical habitat."

Revisions would also increase the power of landowners and entitle them to compensation at fair market value if their development plans were denied within a 180-day period for reasons of species protection.

We agree that it makes sense to look at updating a policy enacted as far back as 1973.

It also stands to reason that private land owners should not shoulder the entire burden of protecting endangered species, as has sometimes been the case.

What is less convincing is the central argument being used to make the point -- most notably from the bill's sponsor, Rep. Richard Pombo.

It needs changing, Pombo has argued, largely because it hasn't worked, because it has enabled the full "recovery" of only a handful of species.

But Pombo misses the point.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 was not designed for the sole purpose of bringing about full, rapid recovery of endangered species. It was designed to prevent their complete extinction and to increase their chances of recovery over time -- significant time. In addition, one could equally argue that its reach should be extended even further precisely because so few species have recovered.

What Pombo is criticizing is not the ESA, but his own biased, hard-right, anti-environmentalist caricature of it.

Those who know Pombo's track record also know that as a businessman and landowner himself, he was a point man in the conservative movement's crusade against the ESA long before arriving in Washington in 1993, and before taking command of the House Resources Committee.

On a matter of this importance, Americans deserve objectivity, not Pombo-style politics.

The Senate would be wise to wait.