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IN MY OPINION: Regna Merritt

Protect the Endangered Species Act

A plan to reduce habitat protection also could strip away things that make Oregon a special place for humans.

Oregon is blessed with some of the most beautiful forests, rivers and beaches in the world. We take care of these natural treasures just like we take pride in being good stewards of our fish and wildlife. We support laws like the Endangered Species Act that protect them.

Because of safeguards the Endangered Species Act provides, majestic bald eagles still soar over the Columbia River Gorge, wild salmon and steelhead still return to rivers like the Deschutes and Clackamas, and humpback whales can still be seen off the Oregon coast.

For more than 30 years, the Endangered Species Act has been a safety net for these and other threatened animals, plants and fish. The act has provided an important system of checks and balances on reckless logging, dam building and other development.

But today Oregon's old-growth forests and wild rivers are threatened by politicians and special interests in Washington, D.C., who seek to eliminate the checks and balances the Endangered Species Act provides. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., is leading the anti-fish and -wildlife charge.

He's announced plans to introduce legislation that would aggressively strip the Endangered Species Act of its strongest protections -- namely,

safeguards that protect the habitat of rare wildlife, plants and fish.

Habitat is simply another name for the places that our fish and wildlife need to live, raise their young and thrive. Bald eagles require the woods, rivers and lakes that Oregon families also enjoy. The healthy rivers that salmon need are the same ones we boat and fish. In many cases they're the sources of our clean drinking water.

Habitat for marbled murrelets and spotted owls are the old-growth forests that define our state. Strip away protections for these animals and the places they call home, and you strip away an important part of what makes Oregon such a special place to live, work and raise a family.

Pombo's plan also weakens protections for species listed as threatened under the law. By definition, threatened species are likely to become endangered in the future unless steps are taken to protect them. Pombo's bill would limit the protection of these species until they actually become endangered. That's like withholding medicine from a patient until she's dying.

More than 200 species currently listed as threatened would lose protection under this provision in Pombo's bill. These include the bald eagle, marbled murrelet and Oregon's coastal coho salmon.

The Endangered Species Act is a safety net that works to protect and recover

species before they go extinct. Pombo's bill would cut large holes in this safety net, with dire consequences for America's -- and Oregon's -- natural heritage.

The Endangered Species Act is a landmark law. It's been enormously successful in preventing the extinction of hundreds of species.

In the coming months Congress likely will vote on Pombo's plan to gut the Endangered Species Act. It's critical that Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Gordon Smith and Reps. Greg Walden, Peter DeFazio, Darlene Hooley, David Wu and Earl Blumenauer stand up for Oregon values. They should oppose his scheme to repeal the system of checks and balances that the Endangered Species Act provides.

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