

Monday, September 26, 2005

Denver Post

Editorial

Reform plan will endanger species

A bill in Congress would erase key protections in the Endangered Species Act, a law that certainly needs streamlining but definitely not weakening.

An effort to supposedly improve the Endangered Species Act will instead gut one of the nation's most important environmental laws. The 32-year-old law needs to be revamped to reduce some time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. But HR 3824 instead rips out the heart of the law. Sponsored by U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., the bill's provisions take aim at the most essential steps for preserving endangered wildlife and plants. The bill passed the House Resources Committee last week 26-12, with eight Democrats voting "yes."

Most species become endangered because their habitats have been damaged, so the Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies to identify and preserve critical habitat. Pombo wants to eliminate this most fundamental provision.

His plan also would erase the requirement that before federal agencies take action, they first must examine how their decisions might affect endangered species. It makes no sense to let federal agencies look only after they have leapt, when it might be too late.

The bill applies almost exclusively to federal lands such as national parks and forests, yet Pombo touts it as an aid to private landowners. In truth, his measure would cost the treasury a pretty penny by requiring the government to pay corporations and landowners if they claim that they've lost the right to develop their private properties because of endangered species protection. The law certainly could be amended to offer landowners more carrot and less stick. But it would be absurd to waste tax dollars paying corporations to just obey the law, as Pombo's bill does.

Two amendments to make the bill less onerous were successfully offered by U.S. Rep. Mark Udall, an Eldorado Springs Democrat who strongly supports protecting endangered species. One would reaffirm the Interior Department's duty to conserve species so they don't become endangered in the first place. The other would authorize the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to compensate ranchers for livestock lost to an endangered predator that has been reintroduced into the wild.

Udall says the law could be improved, but adds the goal should be "mend it, don't end it. This bill ends it." He and others in Congress should keep working to mend it.