

October 07, 2005

Senate must find balance in ESA bill

Editorial

Let us hope that the U.S. Senate is more reasoned than Congress when it comes to altering the federal Endangered Species Act.

The House of Representatives' alterations to the ESA will not enhance the environment or save threatened or endangered species.

While changes are warranted, this is no time to abandon environmental protections, and that's what the legislation that passed the House on a vote of 229-193 would do.

The House version would substantially unravel protections of old-growth forests in the Northwest that are home to the northern spotted owl. It would undo protections that have been in place to protect salmon and other species since 1973.

Billy Frank Jr., a thoughtful member of the Nisqually tribe and a national leader on Indian and environmental issues, tried to steer the Senate in the right direction recently when he testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water. Frank, chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries, said: "The goals and objectives of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 are more essential today than they have ever been. It has helped return the mighty (bald) eagle and the gray whale from the brink of extinction. It has helped bring attention to the plight of the salmon, and it has helped bring some badly needed funding to the effort to turn the tide on salmon decline."

Frank's is a voice of reason. Let us hope the Senate's rewrite of the Endangered Species Act provides environmental safeguards without sacrificing jobs.

The House version:

Would eliminate critical habitat designations for threatened and endangered species.

Calls for recovery plans for imperiled species and protection of areas of special value but does nothing to guarantee how much habitat would be protected.

Requires landowners to be compensated if the presence of a threatened or endangered species limits what they can do with their land. Jeff Koenings, director of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, says that costly provision would create havoc for the Puget Sound chinook recovery plan, which calls for major increases in habitat protection along rivers, streams and watersheds. Where is the federal government going to come up with the money to pay for the lost land value?

Third District Congressman Brian Baird, who represents the Olympia area in Congress, voted against the Republican version of the ESA legislation. Said Baird: "The changes proposed in today's bill, however, will actually endanger the very animals it purports to protect; this bill will destroy the habitats endangered animals need to survive. What's more, this bill will create yet another fiscally irresponsible entitlement program and charge politically appointed bureaucrats with making critically important scientific decisions."

He's right.

The author of the House bill, Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., also proposes to sell off 23 percent of America's national parks property.

That's the kind of environmental legacy he wants to leave future generations. Our kids and grandkids deserve better. Let's hope the Senate delivers a more reasoned approach.