



## Senators push species act reform

By NOELLE STRAUB

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WASHINGTON -- A group of mainly Western senators introduced a bill Thursday that would reform the Endangered Species Act by boosting states' roles in decisions on protecting species and giving tax credits to landowners who help in recovery efforts.

The plan, which would amend one of the nation's most powerful environmental laws, did not contain some of the most controversial changes included in a bill passed by the U.S. House in September. But the proposal still drew criticism from some environmental groups.

The Collaboration for the Recovery of Endangered Species Act would expand states' roles in species management and listing decisions, compensate landowners who contribute to recovery efforts and set a new system of priorities for listing species and recovery goals.

Sen. Michael Crapo, R-Idaho, introduced the bill with support from members of the Senate ESA Working Group, including Sens. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., and Wayne Allard, R-Colo.

"I believe we've met our goal to modernize the act to meet its original purpose -- recovering species," Thomas said. "With recovery plans in place at a time a species is listed we will now have a strong roadmap for how to move forward. This act will be better for landowners, better for states, and better for the species in question."

Sen. Michael Enzi, R-Wyo., also worked on provisions in the bill and praised its introduction.

"This bill should bring a little Christmas cheer to Wyoming farmers and ranchers who have been working with us for years to break ground and modernize the act," he said. "We have a bill that

will both help recover species and preserve landowner livelihood."

But the Center for Biological Diversity, a conservation group, blasted the measure, saying it "would completely derail the endangered species listing program, remove protections for the endangered species habitat, and cut federal oversight of projects that threaten endangered species."

Sen. Lincoln Chafee, R-R.I., a moderate who chairs a key environmental subcommittee, plans to introduce his own version of the bill next year.

The measure introduced Thursday would allow expanded cooperative agreements between the state and federal governments, giving states more say in programs for species.

The measure would create a mechanism allowing government, interest groups and citizens to form committees to collaborate on recovery actions in a local area. It would compensate landowners who contribute to a species' recovery with banking and tax credits and simplify procedures for landowners who participate in the habitat conservation plan process.

The bill would also allow a new system in which landowners could give up development rights in certain areas and in return receive credits that could be sold to other landowners in the same area who need to fill requirements under the act.

Decisions on the endangered or threatened status of a species would be prioritized based on the immediacy of the risk of extinction, the likelihood of achieving recovery, the quality and quantity of information, the degree to which recovering the species helps recover other species and the degree to which recovery would

minimize conflicts with economic activities, military needs or other undefined human activities.

In September, the House passed by a 229-193 vote its own rewrite of the Endangered Species Act that would greatly expand private property rights.

Unlike the Senate proposal, the House bill would repeal all use of the "critical habitat" designation, a move that drew strong opposition from Democrats and moderate Republicans as well as environmental groups.

Also unlike the Senate version, the House measure would require the government to pay property owners the costs of potential development stopped to protect endangered species. In another difference, the House proposal also specifies that the Interior Department must respond within 180 days to landowners with development plans, with a possible written extension, or the development could move forward.

Critics say the House measure also would make the Interior secretary, a political appointee, responsible for some scientific determinations. The House bill was sponsored by U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., whom environmentalists consider one of their top foes in Congress.

### NewsTracker

\* Last we knew: The U.S. House approved a major rewrite of the Endangered Species Act.

\* The latest: Western senators, including U.S. Sen Craig Thomas, introduced their own bill to reform the landmark environmental law.

\* What's next: The bill, and perhaps others on the issue, may be considered by a Senate committee.