

October 4, 2005

## Slash and burn

### Senators should defeat effort to gut the Endangered Species Act

For more than 30 years, the Endangered Species Act has saved hundreds of plants and animals from extinction.

Along the Space Coast alone, the law has ensured that manatees, sea turtles and scrub jays have not disappeared because of the warp-speed development that's devouring and despoiling habitats crucial to their survival.

Habitats that — once protected — give everyone in our community a place to enjoy such beauty as mangrove islands teeming with wildlife, beaches free of towering condos, and untouched woodlands graced with majestic live oaks.

But the law is under serious threat because of a GOP-led move in Congress that would gut the landmark measure and give the oil, mining, timber and development industries a free hand to slash and burn with no regard to the consequences.

This assault can't be allowed to succeed, but it may unless the Senate stops it cold and makes certain the act's proven provisions stay in place.

The push to dismantle the act has been led by Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., chairman of the House Resources Committee, whose antipathy toward conservation is well known.

Late last week — with the Bush administration's blessing — Pombo rammed a bill through the House on a 229-193 vote that's a death sentence for the law.

Not surprising, Rep. Dave Weldon, R-Indianapolis, and Rep. Tom Feeney, R-Oviedo — who have dismal records on environmental protection — voted for this travesty.

The measure would:

Eliminate the need for critical habitat protection, the only way to safeguard dwindling animals and plants.

Give the secretary of the interior, a political appointee, the authority to determine the criteria that should be used in decisions about endangered species — not scientists.

Allow landowners and businesses to press on with harmful projects if their plans aren't evaluated within 180 days, an impossible deadline because federal reviewers are woefully understaffed.

Lavish taxpayer money on landowners who would be compensated if the government blocks development, which could significantly worsen the federal budget deficit.

There is legitimate room for modifications to make the Endangered Species Act work smoother, which could be accomplished through careful review.

But that isn't the aim of this so-called "reform." The real goal is emasculation.

The rewrite faces a tough fight in the Senate, where many Democrats and moderate Republicans recognize it would be a giveaway to landowners and guarantee the loss of many rare animals and plants — including

those we cherish in Brevard County.

We strongly urge Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Melbourne, and Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Orlando, to do everything they can to kill the bill.

Thanks to the act, much of America's natural heritage has been saved because stringent, scientifically-sound practices have prevented species from falling off the precipice.

That great accomplishment cannot be thrown away by those who care more about the bulldozer and making a fast buck than taking care of the good Earth and its wildlife.