

Editorial: Stop trifling with nature

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A developer-friendly bill that waters down the 32-year-old Endangered Species Act is expected to be approved this week by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. Co-sponsoring the bill is Nevada's Rep. Jim Gibbons, who claims the law is so broken that it is a top priority to get it fixed. We believe the shocking, horrific carnage caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita is more worthy of the House's attention right now than a bill currying favor with business interests that are big contributors to Republican campaign coffers.

Gibbons, a candidate for Nevada governor and regarded as the Republican front-runner, partnered with his colleague on the House Resources Committee, Chairman Richard Pombo, R-Calif., in championing the wholesale rewrite of this federal law that protects plants and animals that might otherwise be destroyed forever by rampaging development.

The bill was introduced by Pombo on Monday and received committee approval on Thursday, a pace that left little time for anyone to fully digest its ramifications. But there was little doubt among critics and supporters alike that the bill, if passed by both houses of Congress, would strip away much of the authority that the federal government now has to preserve plant and animal habitat.

Central to bringing an endangered plant or animal back to where its population is no longer threatened is preserving its habitat. But under the House committee's gutting of the act, the federal government would no longer have the authority to designate large areas as "critical habitat" and restrict development there. Instead, it would have to count on the cooperation of landowners, who would be compensated for any land they agreed to set aside for conservation.

This arrangement would result in far less habitat for the plants and animals in danger of becoming extinct. The bill would also give the government just six months to respond to a landowner's request to develop within an endangered species' habitat. If the six months elapsed without a response, the landowner would be free to develop the land without regard to the endangered plant or animal.

In our view, developers do not have a right to treat nature with contempt, which this bill gives them. We are not so smart that we can know what the impacts will be on all of us if a plant, animal or even an insect becomes extinct. The Endangered Species Act may well need some modifications, but the country shouldn't stand for it being rendered as little more than a paper tiger.