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# Western governors call for reform of Endangered Species Act

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SAN DIEGO (AP) - Several Western governors called Friday for a reform of the federal Endangered Species Act that would promote conservation while giving states a greater say in how their lands are managed. "What I believe is we want to recover the species," said Colorado Gov. Bill Owens, a Republican. "Let's not use the act as a way to try to manage private and public properties. Let's use the act to help us learn how to recover the species."

The 18 states that make up the Western Governors Association, which opened its winter meeting in San Diego Friday, say they are uniquely affected by the 30-year-old law. Nearly 70 percent of the nation's endangered species are located in the West, according to the association.

Owens, the association's chairman, supported efforts by House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo, R-Calif., to change the law. Pombo, who is a keynote speaker at panels Saturday, hoped to line up support for his legislative effort reform the act, which remains at the top of his agenda again when Congress reconvenes next month.

Pombo wants to require scientific peer

review for any major decision under the act, including listing species. The congressman also wants critical habitat to be designated for species to be done more efficiently and with better scientific data.

"These governors will be very important to his goal and their goal of improving and modernizing the act," said Brian Kennedy, a Pombo spokesman.

Republican Govs. Linda Lingle of Hawaii, Mike Rounds of South Dakota, Kenny Guinn of Nevada and Judy Martz of Montana also joined the call for reform of the act at a news conference at the opening of the two-day session in San Diego. California's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, was due to attend the session Friday night.

Gov. Bill Richardson, D-New Mexico, however, said a major overhaul of the Endangered Species Act wasn't needed. He said Pombo was setting the bar too high by calling for "stronger science" instead of "sound science."

"I think you need sound science," Richardson said. "I don't think what we want to do is create a scientific definition that increases the possibility of extinction."

David Hogan, of the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, an endangered species and habitat protection advocacy group, said most of the Western governors, with a few exceptions, want to gut the act.

"What's clear from this meeting and other legislative proposals is that many lawmakers are mounting a campaign to really eviscerate our nation's strongest wildlife protection law solely to benefit their cronies in the timber industry, mining industry and others," he said.

On Friday, the governors' association praised a recommendation by Interior Department biologists against adding the sage grouse to the endangered species list, a determination that could wind up benefiting natural gas and oil producers but add to environmentalists' concerns.