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ENDANGERED SPECIES: Report rebuts GOP on species recovery

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Rebutting Republican criticisms of the Endangered Species Act, a leading environmental group claimed today that 90 percent of species protected by the law are recovering at the predicted rate.

The Center for Biological Diversity released a report focusing on the recovery rates of 110 species, in which it found that federal scientists were not far off the mark.

Species recovered, on average, in 25 years, within two years of the average length of time predicted in the federal recovery plans required under the statute, the group found. Among species that CBD examined are gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains, whooping cranes and California condors.

The findings, relying on underlying government data, were based on comparing the species' population trend with the recovery timeline predicted by scientists.

"No other law in the world has done so much to rescue species from the brink of extinction and put them on a path to recovery," said Kieran Suckling, CBD's executive director. "Simply put, the act has been remarkably successful."

The CBD defense, what it calls "a science-based rebuttal," is in response to attacks made on the effectiveness of the act by House Republicans, who have held multiple hearings this Congress to overhaul the nearly 40-year-old law. They say the statute has failed to recover most species and has become a magnet for citizen lawsuits.

House appropriators in a budget bill last year included language blocking the Fish and Wildlife Service from listing new species, though the provision was later overturned by an amendment by Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.).

In the House Science Committee last October, Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight Chairman Paul Broun (R-Ga.) specifically took aim at the act's use of science and its recovery rates for listed species.

"In terms of effectiveness, I believe it would be hard to argue that the law has been anything but an abject failure," Broun told the committee.

CBD maintains that the criticisms are far off target, in part because 80 percent of species have not been listed long enough to determine

whether they will recover in the predicted time frame. Those species have been listed, on average, for 32 years, but their recovery plans do not estimate success until an average of 46 years of listing.

The report also found that even species that have not been listed long enough to reach recovery targets have nevertheless already shown signs that Endangered Species Act protections are helping.

There has, for example, been a 22,312 percent increase in the population of El Segundo blue butterflies and a 3,830 percent increase in the population of San Miguel island foxes since they were listed, according to the report.

Reporter Phil Taylor contributed.