

TexMessage: Environmentalists say Texans' plans to change the Endangered Species Act risks extinctions

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Environmental activists are pushing back against proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act, saying lawmakers were not acting in the public's interest.

Yesterday, Texas on the Potomac reported that Republicans in Congress, including a prominent bloc of Texans, are proposing legislation to modify the ESA, giving local governments a say on rules governing protected wildlife.

Noah Greenwald, the endangered species director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the changes would amount to giving local governments veto power over species protection.

"It will turn what should be a scientific process into a circus," Greenwald said in a phone interview.

The Fish and Wildlife Service takes petitions on adding new species to the endangered list. The current process can take several years. Republican lawmakers pushing for the bill complained specifically about a request of 53 reptile and amphibian species that the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned to add in 2011. Lawmakers said this was an attempt to game they system by overwhelming the service.



The Houston Toad, an endangered amphibian that is endemic to Texas. (Photo by Robert Thomas, Texas State University)

Greenwald said these claims were absolutely not true, and rejected the idea that environmental groups profit off the process. Greenwald said groups have sued the Wildlife Service in the past, but that was merely because the agency missed its own deadlines. Greenwald said that winning the suits only awards attorney fees, and that the suits have been effective in getting the Wildlife Service to have a timely response.

Greenwald said he fears the changes would allow state and local government to ignore federal decisions, putting species' existences into jeopardy.

“The American public does not want species to go extinct,” Greenwald said. “This legislation runs directly counter to that.”

Malcolm McCallum is a professor of biology at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. McCallum agreed that the ESA has been effective, noting that since its inception in 1972, many species have successfully moved off the list.

McCallum argued that giving local governments veto power for species protection made little sense, as their protection was a global issue.

“It would be no different than human rights, and saying you can have human rights overruled in a local constituency,” McCallum said in a phone interview.

McCallum, who focuses on amphibian conservation, said that group of organisms can be particularly insightful to detect emerging environmental crises. Due to their primitive immune systems and their thin skins, they are more susceptible to toxins and changes in the environment.

In a paper in 2007, McCallum sounded the alarm about amphibian extinction rates. Though species have gone extinct throughout earth’s history, McCallum estimated that if currently endangered amphibians go extinct, current extinction rates for group would rise to between 25,000 to 45,000 times that seen in natural history.

“It is beyond anything that has ever been seen on this planet,” McCallum said.

Four Texas House Republicans announced their support for a bill on Tuesday, Bryan’s Bill Flores, Round Rock’s John Carter, Clarendon’s Mac Thornberry, and Midland’s Mike Conaway. The bill matches a similar bill sponsored by John Cornyn in the Senate.