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Giese: Rhetoric will save neither jobs nor species

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You wouldn't think a couple of 2-inch-long salamanders, including one that's blind, would strike fear in the hearts of Texans.

Nor should they.

But opponents of awarding Endangered Species Act protection and critical habitat to two of the nation's most-imperiled salamanders have worked very hard to make sure that's the case.

There is strong peer-reviewed science behind the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designation this week of more than 4,400 acres of critical habitat in central Texas for the Austin blind salamander and Jollyville Plateau salamander, which spend their entire lives underwater in springs and wet caves in Travis and Williamson counties.

Determining how much protected habitat is critical to any species survival is a challenging process, one that includes detailed biological analysis as well as a close look at the potential economic impacts of that designation.

In recent years, opponents of the Endangered Species Act have been increasingly aggressive about rolling out pre-prepared troves of sky-is-falling talking points to make a pro-active case against proposals to protect species and critical habitat, especially when it comes to economic impacts.

One of those rhetorical battles is well under way now in California in response to a Fish and Wildlife Service proposal to protect two species of frogs and a toad and to designate more than 1 million acres as critical habitat for one of the frogs and 750,000 acres for the toad.

As is often the case, opponents -- including two California congressmen -- have provided much hyperbole but few facts to support their claims that the proposed protections would have a "devastating" impact on the local economy and likely cause "severe restrictions" on access to public lands.

In fact, there are no facts to support either assertion.

Similarly, when oil and gas industry spokesmen and Texas politicians successfully lobbied to make sure the dunes sagebrush lizard would not be awarded Endangered Species Act protections last year, their largely unsubstantiated rhetoric, though repeated by many media outlets, was always extremely short on supporting data of any kind.

Texas Congressman Mike Conaway went so far as to say protecting the lizard would threaten the national economy by curtailing domestic oil production and raising the price of gasoline. His assertion mirrored industry claims that protecting the lizard would "shut down drilling activity for a minimum of two years and as many as five years."

In fact, the lizard occurs on only about 2 percent of the Permian's 39 million acres and protecting it would have had virtually no effect on thousands of new oil and gas wells planned for the region.

Similarly, if you believe opponents of protecting the Austin blind and Jollyville Plateau salamanders, designating more than 4,000 acres of critical habitat will pose a huge, job-killing threat to regional economies, infringe on private property rights and scare some developers from even considering the area.

The truth is complicated, but much less dramatic than that.

In most cases critical habitat designation has no impact on private property owners. Only on construction projects that use federal funding or require a federal permit does the designation create consultation and mitigation requirements for private landowners.

For the two salamanders, the Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated the economic impacts of the critical habitat designation would be mostly administrative costs and no more than \$40 million over the next 23 years. Consultants hired by Williamson County have estimated economic impacts of several hundred million dollars over the same period.

What we're not very good at yet is measuring the positive economic benefits associated with preserving species and the irreplaceable habitats we share with them, a much more effective measure of long-term impacts both to the planet and our economy.

By some important measures, we have some dramatic challenges ahead. Scientists now estimate that more than 25 percent of our country's amphibians and reptiles are in danger of becoming extinct.

What it comes down to is how we make value judgments. And 40 years ago this year Congress passed the Endangered Species Act after determining that our values needed rebalancing because far too many species had gone extinct "as a consequence of economic growth and development untempered by adequate concern and conservation," according to the wording of the Act.

One thing is certain: Without the Endangered Species Act, there would likely be no balance at all.