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Latest Endangered Species Act Battle Shows Why It's "Doc" Hastings, Not Dr. Hastings

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It has not been a good year for Rep. Doc Hastings' relentless efforts to gut the Endangered Species Act -- or even a good month, for that matter.

And that's a very good thing for every imperiled plant and animal in America waiting to get the protection of the Act, which celebrates its 40th birthday on Dec. 28.

Since 2011, Hastings has used his perch atop the powerful House Natural Resources Committee to launch one misguided political missile after another at the Act.

Hastings' latest attack was rebuffed this week when he failed to derail the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to award much-needed Endangered Species Act protection to two extremely rare plants from his congressional district in eastern Washington.

But the long journey of the extremely rare White Bluffs bladderpod and the Umtanum desert buckwheat to federal protection is a cautionary tale of the challenges that lie ahead in 2014 and beyond as Rep. Hastings and like-minded Republicans ratchet up their efforts to gut the Act.

The two plants, found only in a small area of the Hanford Reach -- the last free-flowing stretch of the Columbia River -- were first identified as warranting endangered species protection fourteen years ago, in 1999. But the U.S. Fish and Wildlife failed to provide protection because of a backlog of hundreds of species that similarly needed protection and because of poor progress protecting species during the Bush years.

In 2011, the organization I work for, the Center for Biological Diversity, worked out an agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service, requiring the agency to make protection decisions over a six-year period for the hundreds of species caught in the backlog. Under this agreement, the two plants were finally granted protection earlier this year.

In a typically hyperbolic response, Rep. Hastings and some area farmers complained that they had been shut out of the process and hired a geneticist to attempt to show that the bladderpod was not a legitimate species.

With gracious accommodation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delayed protection for eight months, reopened the comment period, held two public hearings, and sent the new genetic work to five independent peer reviewers. After considering all the comments, as

well as the statements of the peer reviewers -- who unanimously agreed the new study failed to show the bladderpod was part of a more widespread species -- the agency again finalized protection.

Unfortunately, Rep. Hastings' efforts did not go totally unrewarded, as the Fish and Wildlife Service did cut all private and state lands from protected critical habitat for the bladderpod.

Clearly, Hastings gripe was not over a purported lack of a transparent public process or over the quality of the science, as even the researcher who conducted the new genetics study admitted it did not include a sufficient sample. Rather, Hastings and other Tea Party Republicans don't want to see any endangered species protected. Indeed, with campaign contributions flowing in from big oil and agribusiness, Rep. Hastings and his ilk would do away with the whole suite of protections for our air, water, wildlife, food and worker safety.

As we move into 2014, Hastings' anti-science antics make it all the more clear how badly we need all these protections, none more than the Endangered Species Act, which has prevented the extinction of 99 percent of the more than 1,500 plants and animals it protects, while putting hundreds on the road to recovery.

And now, despite Doc Hastings, the Act will begin the tough work of saving the critically imperiled White Bluff's bladderpod and the Umtanum desert buckwheat.