

THE HILL

GOP gangs up on endangered species law

By Julian Hattem
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House Republicans are charging the Obama administration with using “political science” to justify adding new plants and animals to the endangered species list.

Agencies like the Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service are opaque and ignore state and local officials, GOP lawmakers on the House Natural Resources Committee alleged during a Thursday hearing.

“It is true that protection of endangered species is popular among the American people,” Rep. John Fleming (R-La.) noted, but “what isn’t popular is the disruption to people’s lives and to commerce that’s happening through its implementation.”

Rep. Steve Daines (R-Mont.) added that federal officials appear to be using “a lot of political science versus sound science” to justify their actions.

Democrats and wildlife conservation activists say that the Endangered Species Act has been successful in saving rare and threatened varieties of life.

Critics say they don’t have a problem with the law itself; just the way agencies are implementing it.

“I support the Endangered Species Act,” Rep. Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.) said. “I am concerned about the way that it has been implemented and litigated, and that litigation is driving its implementation, rather than public policy and science.”

On Thursday, Democrats were largely willing to let Republicans wage their attacks. Only three Democrats came to speak at the Endangered Species Act hearing, while more than a dozen Republicans showed up.

Critics oppose lawsuits conservation groups have filed after federal agencies miss their deadlines to review whether species should be added to the endangered species list. The process, sometimes known as “sue and settle,” allows environmental groups to force agencies to speed up their reviews, critics say.

But environmentalists say that they’re merely forcing federal officials to obey the law.

In 2011, for instance, federal wildlife officials reached a landmark legal agreement with the Center for Biological Diversity to review 757 species by 2018. In a statement on Thursday, Center for Biological Diversity endangered species policy director Brett Hartl said that the settlement “simply requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to do its job in a timely manner and make decisions about protecting species.”

Thursday’s hearing was the sixth the Natural Resources Committee has held to contest the 2011 decision, according to the conservation group.

Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings (R-Wash.) announced on Thursday morning that the panel would consider reforms to the Endangered Species Act when Congress returns from recess in January.