

GOP considers ways to ‘modernize’ endangered species

law

BY TIMOTHY CAMA, THE HILL 02/15/17

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Senate Republicans considered ideas Wednesday to “modernize” the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and solve the problems they and their constituents have long decried.

Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman John Barrasso (R-Wyo.) said at the hearing that he hopes to change the law to give more voice to landowners, industry groups and others who think species protections hamper business or other land uses.

For the first time in years, the GOP controls both chambers of Congress and the White House, affording lawmakers a potential opportunity to change what has been a bedrock environmental law for decades.

But the GOP lawmakers sought to clarify repeatedly that they support the goals of the ESA and want also to improve how it saves threatened plant and animals species.

“The Endangered Species Act isn’t working today. We should all be concerned when the Endangered Species Act fails to work,” Barrasso said.

“States, counties, wildlife managers, home builders, construction companies, farmers, ranchers and other stakeholders are all making it clear that the Endangered Species Act is not working today.”

He said that less than 3 percent of species that are designated as endangered or threatened — a process that implements numerous land use restrictions and other standards — have recovered enough to be taken off the list.

“As a doctor, if I admit 100 patients to the hospital, and only three recover enough under my treatment to be discharged, I would deserve to lose my medical license,” he said.

Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.), the panel’s top Democrat and the only one able to ask questions due to a party caucus meeting, did not completely rule out changes to the ESA.

But he warned that the law's purpose must remain, and he would prefer to implement policies that have bipartisan consensus, something few of the Senate GOP's ideas enjoy.

"We should also keep in mind its purpose: to prevent the extinction of species and to do our best to restore those at risk," he said. "I, for one, am reluctant to do anything to compromise the successes we have achieved."

The Environment Committee's Republican members brought up numerous problems they have with the way the ESA is currently structured. For example, they said it doesn't sufficiently account for state opinions, it unnecessarily restricts the use of private land, and environmental groups too often sue the federal government to get a species listed and then get attorneys' fees from the government.

"The landowners want a pristine environment, the same as you might see from another perspective," said Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) "And it's easy to sit in Washington and talk about everything's working well. When you're out in the states, that's where you have problems."

Inhofe said the main problems with the law are that stakeholders, landowners and states are ignored and de-listing is rare.

Other Republicans piled on.

"Myself, and many others, as we have heard today, have grown concerned that the Endangered Species Act, at times, has been implemented in a manner that harms Arkansas families, farmers, businesses and communities, with disputable benefits at times to wildlife," said Sen. John Boozman (R-Ark.).

"I think it is clear that better engagement is necessary, that we have to have that engagement with landowners in order to address the deficiencies many of us feel are within the ESA," said Sen. Deb Fischer (R-Neb.).