

Trump administration wants to change key parts of the Endangered Species Act

By Veronica Stracqualursi, CNN
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Washington (CNN) — The Trump administration announced major changes it wants to make to parts of the Endangered Species Act that it argues loosen regulations while providing the best conservation results, but environmentalists warn the suggested changes to the 45-year-old law could harm species that need protection.

Among the proposed changes announced by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Thursday is allowing officials to consider economic impact when enforcing the ESA.

“We propose to remove the phrase, ‘without reference to possible economic or other impacts of such determination’” the proposal states.

Another suggested shift in the policy would also end the service’s practice of providing future “threatened” species with the same protections as endangered species automatically. Instead, protections for future threatened species will be determined by “the species’ individual conservation needs.”



PONTE VEDRA BEACH, FL - MAY 10:
A bald eagle soars over the golf course during the third round of THE PLAYERS Championship on the stadium course at TPC Sawgrass on May 10, 2014 in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. (Photo by Sam Greenwood/Getty Images)

CNN first reported in April that the Fish and Wildlife Service was proposing a repeal of the so-called blanket rule. Critics say removing blanket protections will mire the process of protecting threatened species in years of bureaucracy.

The ESA defines threatened species as “any species that is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.”

Because the current law leaves “foreseeable future” open to interpretation, the Trump administration wants officials determining species’ “threatened” status to “explain the extent” those future threats and species’ responses are “probable.”

If implemented, the proposal would also change the designation process of critical habitats -- areas identified as essential to a species’ conservation.

“While this provision is intended to reduce the burden of regulation in rare circumstances in which designation of critical habitat does not contribute to the conservation of the species, the Services recognize the value of critical habitat as a conservation tool and expect to designate it in most cases,” the proposal says.

“One thing we heard over and over again was that ESA implementation was not consistent and often times very confusing to navigate,” Greg Sheehan, the US Fish and Wildlife Service principal deputy director, said in a statement.

Sheehan said the proposed changes are “to produce the best conservation results for the species while reducing the regulatory burden on the American people.”

The Interior Department and Commerce Department is encouraging the public to provide additional feedback within 60 days after the proposal is published.

“This proposal turns the extinction-prevention tool of the Endangered Species Act into a rubber stamp for powerful corporate interests,” Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement.

Hartl said these proposals would “slam a wrecking ball into the most crucial protections” and argued that the bald eagle and the gray whale would be extinct today if these proposed regulations had been in place during the 1970s, when President Richard Nixon signed the ESA in December 1973.

Christy Goldfuss, senior vice president for Energy and Environment Policy at the Center for American Progress, argued the proposed changes will make it “more difficult” for agencies to protect threatened species and help recovery efforts.

“These dangerous actions will further accelerate the loss of species and habitat in stark contrast to the explicit purpose of the law,” Goldfuss said in a statement Thursday, arguing that the ESA has helped keep “99 percent” of listed species from going extinct.

CNN’s Gregory Wallace contributed to this report.