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Activists: Endangered species in danger if Trump rolls back protections

By Bill Cummings
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Connecticut activists are shaking their heads over the Trump administration's latest environmental rules, saying proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act favor developers over fragile plants and struggling animal species.

"The ecosystem is complex resource," said Patrick Comins, executive director of the Connecticut Audubon Society.

"You don't know what the effects are of removing a species," Comins said. "Our biggest concern is the Piping Plover. It would be a shame to have all this success [in preserving the species] and then have its protections weakened."

The Piping Plover is an example of how the ESA is applied. The tiny shoreline bird — a common sight along Connecticut's coast — was nearly extinct until given threatened species status, which allowed officials to ban human activity in its nesting areas.

The plover population has now returned to a point that it's nearly eligible to be removed from threatened status.

Under proposed rules rolled out this week by the Trump administration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration would be directed to strike language that instructs regulators to ignore the economic impact of protecting wildlife.

Other changes include potential limits on the designation of "critical habitat" for imperiled plants and animals, an end to giving threatened species the same protections as those at risk of extinction and streamlining inter-agency consultations when federal government actions could jeopardize a species.

U.S. Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del and a top Democrat on the Environment and Public Works Committee, said the proposed regulations do more harm than good.

"The new regulations undercut vital sections of the ESA that may harm imperiled species and are more examples of the Trump administration catering to industry instead of the interests of the American people," Carper said in a statement.

"The ESA, which is helping to recover the Red Knot and Piping Plover, continues to be one of our country's most popular and successful environmental protection laws," Carper said.

Numerous conflicts between developers and environmentalists have arisen since the 1973 passage of the ESA, ranging from disruptions to logging to restoring gray wolves.

Small snails, beetles and other creatures with threatened protection status have blocked multimillion dollar developments or forced corporate owners to find another location.

“Very protective”

Trump administration officials said the new rules would advance conservation by simplifying and improving how the landmark ESA is applied.

“These rules will be very protective,” said U.S. Interior Department Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt, adding the changes reduce the “conflict and uncertainty” associated with many protected species.

Greg Sheehan, deputy director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the Trump administration is “dedicated to being a good neighbor” and protector of the environment.

“One thing we heard over and over again was that ESA implementation was not consistent and often times very confusing to navigate,” Sheehan said.

“We are proposing these improvements to produce the best conservation results for the species while reducing the regulatory burden on the American people,” Sheehan said.

But critics said the changes will speed extinctions in the name of furthering an anti-environment agenda.

Species currently under consideration for protections are especially at risk, including the North American wolverine and the monarch butterfly, they said.

“It essentially turns every listing of a species into a negotiation,” said Noah Greenwald with the Center for Biological Diversity. “They could decide that building in a species’ habitat or logging in trees where birds nest doesn’t constitute harm.”

More than 700 animals and almost 1,000 plants are shielded by the law and hundreds more are under consideration for protections. Fewer than 100 species have been taken off the threatened and endangered lists, either because they were deemed recovered or, in at least 10 cases, went extinct.

President Donald Trump and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke have been strong advocates for oil and gas drilling and other types of development, frequently criticizing environmental policies for hindering economic activity.

The proposed policies follow long standing criticism of the ESA by business groups and some members of Congress. Republican lawmakers are pushing legislation to enact broad changes to the law, saying it hinders economic activities while doing little to restore species.

Local impact

Comins said many species in Connecticut have a threatened status, including Plovers, the Red Knot shorebird, the Northern Long-Eared Bat and the Puritan Tiger Beetle.

Asked why anyone should care about a beetle, Comins pointed to the now extinct Passenger Pigeon as the possible source of Lyme disease.

“The Passenger Pigeon went from forest to forest devouring acorns and nuts,” Comins explained, adding that when the pigeon became extinct, deer and mice populations thrived, along with Lyme disease.

“You never know the effects,” Comins said of losing a species.

Laura McMillan, a spokesperson for Connecticut Fund for the Environment and Save the Sound, said the proposed changes are worrisome.

“The effects of the Trump administration’s proposal to weaken ESA protections may not be evident immediately,” McMillan said. “But as climate change and development of woodlands progress, and more and more species become threatened, the proposed plan could have cumulative and irreversible effects in the future.”

McMillan added the proposal prioritizes costs to industry above the public benefits of protection.

“With an administration that doesn’t believe in climate change, the proposed ESA rules could have disastrous effects for coastal places like Connecticut,” McMillan said.

James Miller, a spokesperson for the Nature Conservancy, said the ESA is the best defense for species facing threats of extinction

“More than 99 percent of all species listed under the Act have been prevented from going extinct,” Miller said. “We believe any changes to the regulations must only enhance outcomes for species from this bedrock statute. [The Conservancy] will not support any changes that diminish or weaken ESA’s core protections.”

Chris Collibee, a spokesperson for the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, said the agency is reviewing the proposed changes.

“The DEEP is committed to the protection of all of Connecticut’s wildlife, and will continue the fight to protect our endangered and at-risk species,” Collibee said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report