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Trump administration announces changes to endangered species rules

- By
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The Trump administration announced changes to how the government handles [endangered species](#) on Monday, a move that advocates say could make it more difficult to protect species that are threatened by human activity and [climate change](#).

The newly finalized rules would change the requirements for how the government decides to add or remove species from the list of endangered [animals](#) that are regulated by the government, including limiting how much habitat can be protected to areas where the animals currently live. The changes would also require that each species listed as threatened in the future have its own plan for how it will be protected and if any hunting of that species is allowed, instead of issuing blanket policies that apply to every threatened species.

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The changes would not alter the protections for species currently listed as threatened or endangered, but would apply to future decisions about changing listings.

Administration officials said the changes will still protect critical species and habitat but will also make the process more efficient and follow President Donald Trump's mandate to eliminate regulations.

One of the new rules announced on Monday also formally defines "endangered" and "threatened," which will be used to decide if species should be protected or removed from the endangered species list. Under the rule "endangered" means a species is in danger of extinction now, while "threatened" means it is in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future.

Gary Frazer, assistant director for endangered species at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the changes will still take into account the impact of [climate change](#) when deciding if a species is threatened in the "foreseeable future" but only as far as regulators can be confident in the changes in future decades, which could exclude some climate models criticized by the administration that predict [more serious consequences](#) of global warming near the end of the century.

"We will look out into the future only so far as we can reliably predict, and not speculate," Frazer said on a call with reporters Monday. "The language we use in our regs is that it'll go only so far as we can reasonably determine that the threats -- so this might be climate-induced changes to the physical environment and the species response to those threats -- are likely. So this really is very much a case-by-case determination."

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A monarch butterfly collects nectar from a flower in the People's Garden, in Washington, D.C. in 2014.

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Conservation advocates say the changes are another rollback that will weaken protections for many species and that they plan to challenge them in court.

"These changes represent an unprecedented weakening of the Endangered Species Act that will kneecap our ability to save wildlife from extinction," said Noah Greenwald, endangered species director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

Gerry Broome/AP, FILE

A red wolf roams its habitat at the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, N.C., on Monday, May 13, 2019.

Advocates say changing the way the government decides which areas to protect could be a threat to species like polar bears, that are moving out of their traditional habitat as it faces increasing threats from climate change.

This is a developing news story. Please check back for updates.