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Trump administration overhauls U.S. wildlife protections over objections of conservationists

[Valerie Volcovici](#)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The Trump administration on Monday finalized changes to provisions of the U.S. Endangered Species Act it says will streamline the decades-old wildlife protection law but which conservation groups say will threaten at-risk species.

FILE PHOTO: A grizzly bear and her two cubs approach the carcass of a bison in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, United States, July 6, 2015. REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

The 1970s-era Act is credited with bringing back from the brink of extinction species such as bald eagles, gray whales and grizzly bears, but the law has long been a source of frustration for drillers, miners and other industries because new listings can put vast swaths of land off limits to development.

The weakening of the Acts protections is one of many moves by U.S. President Donald Trump, a Republican, to roll back existing regulations to hasten oil, gas and coal production, as well as grazing and logging on federal land.

The changes would end a practice that automatically conveys the same protections for threatened species as for endangered species, and would strike language that guides officials to ignore economic impacts of how animals should be safeguarded. The original Act protected species regardless of the economics of the area protected.

"The revisions finalized with this rulemaking fit squarely within the President's mandate of easing the regulatory burden on the American public, without sacrificing our species' protection and recovery goals," U.S. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross said in a statement.

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The changes were announced by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Commerce Department's National Marine Fisheries Service.

Conservationists and environmentalists said they would challenge the revised law in court.

"These changes crash a bulldozer through the Endangered Species Act's lifesaving protections for America's most vulnerable wildlife," Noah Greenwald, the Center for Biological Diversity's endangered species director, said in a statement.

"For animals like wolverines and monarch butterflies, this could be the beginning of the end," Greenwald said.

He said the group would go to court to block the rewritten regulations, "which only serves the oil industry and other polluters who see endangered species as pesky inconveniences."

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The new rules will also prohibit designation of critical habitat for species threatened by climate change, the Center for Biological Diversity said. Trump rejects mainstream climate science.

Conservation groups and attorneys general of several states including California and Massachusetts had been critical of the changes first proposed last year, saying they were in violation of the purpose of the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

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