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Trump administration overhauls Endangered Species Act as critics fear animal extinction

[Doyle Rice](#), USA TODAY Published 10:29 a.m. ET Aug. 12, 2019 | Updated 12:16 p.m. ET Aug. 12, 2019

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The Trump administration announced Monday a major overhaul to the Endangered Species Act in a way it says will reduce regulations, but environmentalists say will push more animals and plants to extinction because of threats from climate change and human activities.

The changes end blanket protections for animals newly deemed threatened and allow federal authorities for the first time to take into account the economic cost of protecting a particular species.

The Endangered Species Act now protects more than 1,600 species in the United States and its territories.

"The best way to uphold the Endangered Species Act is to do everything we can to ensure it remains effective in achieving its ultimate goal – recovery of our rarest species," U.S. Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt said in a statement. "The act's effectiveness rests on clear, consistent and efficient implementation."

U.S. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross said "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."

In this Jan. 13, 2015 file photo, a male red wolf enjoys a feeding in its habitat at the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, N.C. (Photo: Gerry Broome, AP)

The act is credited with helping save the bald eagle, California condor, the grizzly bear and dozens of other animals and plants from extinction since President Richard Nixon signed it into law in 1973.

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The Trump administration says the changes will make regulation more efficient and less burdensome while preserving protections for wildlife.

At least 10 attorneys general joined conservation groups in protesting an early draft of the changes, saying they put more wildlife at greater risk of extinction.

Environmental groups reacted with concern. "These changes crash a bulldozer through the Endangered Species Act's lifesaving protections for America's most vulnerable wildlife," said Noah Greenwald, the Center for Biological Diversity's endangered species director. "For animals like wolverines and monarch butterflies, this could be the beginning of the end."

"We'll fight the Trump administration in court to block this rewrite, which only serves the oil industry and other polluters who see endangered species as pesky inconveniences," he said. "We'll do everything in our power to get these dangerous regulations rescinded, including going to court."

Drew Caputo of the environmental group Earthjustice said "this effort to gut protections for endangered and threatened species has the same two features of most Trump administration actions: it's a gift to industry, and it's illegal. We'll see the Trump administration in court."

The Endangered Species Act has prevented more than 99% of listed species from going extinct, according to Earthjustice. It is also wildly popular, with 90% of Americans supporting the act, the group said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official Margaret Everson said during a press call Monday that the changes "provide the maximum degree of regulatory certainty" while protecting species.

The Property and Environment Research Center, however, praised the changes, saying that "our interest is getting this landmark wildlife protection law to work better," said the center's executive director Brian Yablonski. "That means fostering conditions so landowners become more enthusiastic in their role as stewards for species recovery, not worried if they find an endangered species on their land."

A United Nations report warned in May that more species – as many as 1 million plants and animals – are now threatened with extinction than at any time in human history, due to development, climate warming and other threats.

Contributing: The Associated Press