

A bipartisan push could change state wildlife protection

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Scientists say the world is on the precipice of a mass extinction. The United Nations estimates that 1 million species are on the verge of being wiped out, threatened by climate change, habitat loss, pollution, invasive

species and poaching.

In the United States, the [federal government](#) has oversight of the more than 1,600 species listed under the Endangered Species Act—and powerful legal tools to protect them. But more than 12,000 additional species have been identified as declining or rare, and [wildlife experts](#) fear that without action many of them will soon be endangered.

The responsibility for protecting these species—and preventing the federal endangered species list from growing—falls on state fish and [wildlife](#) agencies. Perceived largely as game wardens, these agencies receive sparse state dollars: The bulk of their money comes from hunting and fishing license sales, and federal taxes collected on outdoor equipment.

Despite their limited size, wildlife agencies' authority can cover state, federal and private land. Collectively, state and tribal wildlife officials preside over an area larger than Alaska, Texas and California combined. But the agencies barely have enough money to oversee hunting and fishing programs, let alone protect non-game species.

A [bill](#) in Congress would change that. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act, also known as RAWA, would direct nearly \$1.4 billion annually to state and tribal wildlife agencies to protect overlooked species. The bill also would likely require states to put up 25% in matching funds for the money they receive. Wildlife officials say the extra cash would allow them to multiply their work on non-game animals to many times their current capacity.

"[Hunting and fishing revenues] haven't provided the necessary funding for everything that's at stake now," said Sara Parker Pauley, president of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, a Washington, D.C.-based coordination and advocacy group for the state agencies.

Pauley also serves as director of the Missouri Department of Conservation.

"There are at least 12,000 different species in need of proactive efforts to prevent them from becoming endangered. There are all these needs out there that the current funding structure is not capable of tackling."

While the bill enjoys strong bipartisan support in the House and the backing of many state leaders, a few conservatives argue the burden of funding conservation should fall on hunters and anglers, not taxpayers. Meanwhile, Senate Democrats may prefer to address the issue as part of a larger package that includes funding for endangered species. And some environmentalists who agree with the bill's goals say they have concerns about its funding formula and accountability provisions.

Wildlife experts say the existing funding model has been a success story, and the money contributed by sportsmen and women has helped restore animals such as white-tailed deer, wild turkeys and wood ducks. But now, they say, the conservation need has grown beyond what hunters and anglers can support, especially as license sales decline and climate change accelerates the threat.

U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, the Michigan Democrat who authored RAWA, said the agencies don't have enough money to protect all the species that are at risk.

"It's part of their mission, but they haven't had the financial support they need to implement those plans to be proactive on conservation efforts," Dingell said in an interview.

Under a federal grant program established in 2000, states already have drafted the blueprints for what they'd do with the money. These investments would include restoration of vital habitats, invasive species

management, research programs, wildlife crossings, pollinator plantings, land acquisitions, animal reintroductions and incentive programs with private landowners.

"The plan is to keep common species common," said Dan Eichinger, director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which oversees wildlife management. "We're trying to find species that are starting to trend in a direction we're not excited about and identify the habitats they depend on. We don't want any species to end up listed as threatened or endangered."

Michigan expects to receive \$35 million to \$40 million a year if the bill is passed, which Eichinger said would be a "game changer" for the state. Currently, the Michigan DNR has an annual budget of \$79.6 million for its Wildlife and Fisheries divisions, the vast majority of which is spent on game species (some game species work benefits non-game animals, too). The divisions receive a little more than \$2 million in federal grants to develop habitats for non-game species.

In Washington state, which would receive about \$22 million a year, officials say they can't fully carry out their mission without the additional money.

"In some cases, we know what to do but we lack the resources to do it," said Hannah Anderson, the lead wildlife diversity officer with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "In other cases, we don't know what to do and we lack the resources to figure it out. Right now, we're only able to scratch the surface. This bill would allow us to do that proactive work early and avoid the triage place of Endangered Species Act listings."

Many state fish and wildlife agencies have seen their revenues decline in recent years as license sales have ebbed. Although the pandemic led to a

surge in hunting and fishing, it's unclear whether that bump will result in long-term gains, and most agencies are still seeing license sales below historical participation levels.

Even agencies that have benefited from periodic infusions of state money have been hit with budget cuts from lawmakers.

Some states cut funding during the Great Recession and never fully restored it. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission has seen its funding from the state shrink over the past decade, said Tim Gestwicki, CEO of the North Carolina Wildlife Federation, a conservation nonprofit. He said the agency needs federal money to provide stability and keep it free from political interference.

"If you have some [state] legislators who don't want you working on something, they can handcuff you from following your mission," Gestwicki said. "A state agency can't run without knowing what kind of resources they're going to have."

Dingell said momentum for her bill has grown in recent years. During the last Congress, the bill earned 185 cosponsors, including 45 Republicans. It sailed through the House Natural Resources Committee on a 26-6 vote and was adopted by the House in a voice vote. But with no action in the Senate, backers are starting from scratch this year. Dingell said she intends to introduce the bill in the next couple weeks.

Twenty-seven governors have endorsed the bill, along with state lawmakers from both parties and a coalition of conservation and business groups. Businesses generally want to prevent species in their region from being added to the endangered species list, because the legal protections under the Endangered Species Act can block development and change land-use guidelines. Supporters of the bill include energy companies, farms, golf courses and breweries. The proposal seems to

enjoy wide-ranging, bipartisan support—except in the U.S. Senate.

RAWA supporters were hopeful that Democrats' new Senate majority would help the bill reach the finish line in 2021. But several Senate Democratic staffers who have worked on the issue told Stateline it won't be that simple.

Without a plan to offset the spending mandated in the bill, they said the proposal is unlikely to earn any Republican supporters, even though it enjoys significant GOP backing in the House and at the state level. Democrats' thin majority would give the bill a difficult path to passage.

The aides also noted that the bill wouldn't provide more resources for federal agencies, which have authority over species that are already listed as endangered. They said senators are working on a more "complete strategy" that would address the most imperiled species, attempting to build momentum for a larger package. The details and timeline of such a plan are unclear, as are its effects on the funding model of state wildlife agencies.

Still, backers of the bill intend to push ahead. An aide to U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, a New Mexico Democrat, said the lawmaker intends to introduce a Senate version of the bill in the coming weeks and build support in the upper chamber, calling it a "big priority."

Some environmental groups also have concerns about the proposal, although they say more recent versions of the bill have moved closer to addressing some of their complaints. They think its funding formula is weighted too heavily toward the states with the most land area, instead of those with the most at-risk species.

"You can tweak the funding formula so that states with the most imperiled species get the most amount of money," said Brett Hartl,

government affairs director with the Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based nonprofit whose conservation efforts focus on endangered species. "We are supportive of the goal and the objective, but these details really do matter."

Dingell said she feels both land area and at-risk species are important factors, and she's working to address those concerns in the new iteration of the bill.

Some environmental groups would like to see a greater focus on plant species, which is a challenge because plants are overseen by different agencies in many states. The bill is expected to provide a 5% funding bonus for states that include plants in their conservation plans, a nod to those who want to see flora prioritized.

Meanwhile, RAWA supporters expect this year's version of the bill to require states to spend 15% of their funding on endangered species, which some environmentalists feel is insufficient.

"We're not opposed to RAWA," said Jacob Malcom, a conservation specialist with Defenders of Wildlife, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that works to protect native animals and plants. "It's just that we think it would be irresponsible to pursue this, which is the biggest funding undertaking of its kind in a generation, without taking care of these issues."

The environmental groups also would like to see the bill include stronger reporting and accountability mechanisms for states to show how they're spending the money.

Some conservatives oppose the bill for fiscal reasons and think hunters and anglers should continue to bear the cost of conservation funding.

"[The current funding model] is set on a 'beneficiary pays' principle," said U.S. Rep. Tom McClintock, a California Republican, during a committee hearing on the bill in the last Congress. "This approach spares general taxpayers who have no interest in hunting and fishing. [Under this bill], the average American family will pay \$11 a year to support a program they have no interest in and get no benefit from."

The bill is being watched closely by more than just state agencies. Many of the country's 574 federally recognized tribes have their own wildlife programs, and they would be eligible for \$97.5 million of the program's funding. Tribes have jurisdiction over 140,000 square miles of land, an area roughly the size of Montana that includes many critical habitats. Like states, many tribes have struggled to secure adequate funding for their wildlife agencies.

"This is landmark legislation, and it will make a huge impact in Indian Country," said Julie Thorstenson, executive director of the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society, a nonprofit that networks on behalf of tribal agencies. "Tribes are really instrumental in a lot of the threatened and endangered species work, and this bill would also allow them to use the funding on species that have cultural significance to them."

The Navajo Nation, which has the largest reservation in the country, maintains its own endangered species list. It has worked to protect populations of golden eagles and bighorn sheep. The tribe's land has suffered from overgrazing and [invasive species](#), and with a budget of just \$2 million, its Department of Fish and Wildlife lacks the resources to fully carry out its conservation work.

"This bill has tremendous potential to do a lot more than what we're doing," said Gloria Tom, the agency's director. "We need these types of restoration programs for our lands. These are all the things we've wished

for over the past 50 years."

With funding from the proposal, the Navajo Nation would be able to sample its small creeks for rare fish, restore watersheds with native vegetation and create its own hunter education program to incorporate Navajo practices. Tom noted that conservation in Indian Country doesn't just save species; it preserves tribal ways of life that rely on nature for traditional and cultural practices.

"Tribal members use our wildlife and plants in their everyday lives," she said. "We also base our management programs in science, but we have the cultural component that is also very important to our people."

Whether the bill passes this year, wildlife managers say they can't fulfill their conservation mission without a different funding model.

"Game [species](#) may be doing OK, but we are losing the battle on this non-game side, and losing the battle on habitat," said Pauley, the Missouri director and national advocate. "It's going to take bigger government to respond to that, to give additional resources."

Eichinger, the Michigan director, is hopeful that state wildlife agencies can build on their game-animal successes.

"The country finds itself facing another crisis in conservation," he said. "And it's demanding something different and something more than we are offering today."

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