

Trump aims to end automatic protections for some species

July 19 2018, by Matthew Brown



In this Oct. 20, 2017, file photo, John Miano of Destin, Fla., holds a monarch butterfly on his fingertip as he waits for the newly tagged insect to take flight during the Panhandle Butterfly House's Monarch Madness festival in Navarre, Fla. The Trump administration is proposing changes to the government's endangered species program that wildlife advocates say could make it harder to protect monarchs. (Devon Ravine/Northwest Florida Daily News via AP, File)

The Trump administration on Thursday proposed ending automatic protections for threatened animal and plant species and limiting habitat safeguards that are meant to shield recovering species from harm.

Administration officials said the new rules would advance conservation by simplifying and improving how the landmark Endangered Species Act is used.

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

Such conflicts have been numerous in the decades since the act's 1973 passage, ranging from disruptions to logging to protect spotted owls in the Pacific Northwest, to attacks on livestock that have accompanied the restoration of gray wolves in the Rocky Mountains and upper Midwest.

The proposed changes include potential limits on the designation of "critical habitat" for imperiled plants and animals; an end to a regulatory provision that gives threatened plants and animals the same protections as species that are considered more endangered; and streamlining inter-agency consultations when federal government actions could jeopardize a species.

Wildlife advocates and Democratic lawmakers said such moves would speed extinctions in the name of furthering the administration's anti-environment agenda. Species currently under consideration for protections are considered 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."



This Feb. 27, 2016, file photo provided by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, from a remote camera set by biologist Chris Stermer, shows a wolverine in the Tahoe National Forest near Truckee, Calif. Changes proposed by the Trump administration to the U.S. government's endangered species program would end automatic protections for species listed as threatened, which advocates say could harm the wolverine. (Chris Stermer/California Department of Fish and Wildlife via AP, file)

More than 700 animals and almost 1,000 plants in the U.S. are shielded by the law. 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.

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

But Zinke has also sought to portray himself as a conservationist in the vein of President Teddy Roosevelt who will protect the nation's natural resources.

The administration's proposals came amid longstanding criticism of the Endangered Species Act 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.

One of the chief architects of that effort, U.S. Sen. John Barrasso, a Republican from Wyoming, said the administration's proposals were "a good start" but indicated that more work was needed.

"The administration is limited by an existing law that needs to be updated," Barrasso said. "The changes I have proposed will empower states, promote the recovery of species, and allow local economies to thrive."

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Citation: Trump aims to end automatic protections for some species (2018, July 19) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-trump-aims-automatic-species.html>

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