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By Kevin Martinez
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Trump administration sabotages Endangered Species Act

The Trump administration has announced a major overhaul in the way it would enforce the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The changes allow federal authorities to take economic considerations into account when protecting a certain species. Environmental groups say the new rules will push more plants and animals into extinction from habitat loss and climate change.

Since 1973 when the Endangered Species Act was signed into law by President Richard Nixon, more than 1,600 species of wildlife have been legally protected in the US and its territories. The act has been credited for saving the bald eagle, California condor, the grizzly bear and dozens of other species from extinction.

Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, who made billions as an asset stripper in steel and other industries, spoke for the most rapacious sections of big business, declaring, “The revisions finalized with this rulemaking fit squarely within the president’s mandate of easing the regulatory burden on the American public ...”

Wildlife experts have criticized the administration’s moves, with Noah Greenwald, endangered species director at the Center for Biological Diversity saying, “These changes crash a bulldozer through the Endangered Species Act’s lifesaving protections for America’s most vulnerable wildlife. For animals like wolverines and monarch butterflies, this could be the beginning of the end.”

According to environmental group Earthjustice, the Endangered Species Act has stopped 99 percent of its protected species from going extinct. The Act also is also approved by 90 percent of Americans, according to the group.

Pro-business groups like the Property and Environment Research Center welcomed the changes. Executive Director Brian Yablonski said, “Our interest is getting this landmark wildlife protection law to work better. 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.”

The deregulation of environmental rules has long been sought after by Democratic and Republican representatives of big business, with some saying the recent overhaul does not go far enough. Wyoming Republican Senator John Barrasso said, “These final rules are a good start, but the administration is limited by an existing law that needs to be updated. We must modernize the Endangered Species Act in a way that empowers states, promotes the recovery of species, and allows local economies to thrive.”

Before Monday’s announcement there were several attempts to gut the ESA. Since 2017, there have been about two dozen bills targeting the ESA that were either introduced in Congress or proposed by the Trump administration.

Among the changes proposed by the White House are reducing the protections for any species that are added to the “threatened species” list in the future. Until Monday, animals considered “threatened” were given the same protection as “endangered” animals. Now they will be protected only on a case-by-case basis.

Another significant change will allow regulators to consider economic costs like lost revenue from companies unable to develop on protected land, when deciding to protect a certain species. The rules currently say decisions should be based “without reference to possible economic or other impacts of such determination.”

Although the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service have claimed that they will not be doing cost-benefit analyses for protecting wildlife, the change in wording will allow just that.

Other changes include revising what a “critical habitat” means. Under current procedures, applied, for example, in declaring the polar bear an endangered species in 2010, the FWS considered the impact of global warming on the polar icecap and nearby areas of Alaska and Canada to which the bears might be forced to move.

The rules also narrow down the timeframe for calculating such “future threats” in the “foreseeable future.” Given that the Trump administration has fought tooth and nail to deny or downplay climate change science, the new changes can impede efforts to save animals like polar bears and whooping cranes which are threatened by environmental changes happening now and in coming years.

The FWS assured the public that, “we will consider the best available science and evaluate impacts to the species that may result from changing climate within the foreseeable future.” The usage of the phrase “best available data” serves as a loophole in determining which lands are protected and which are not. According to the FWS, some commenters wanted

specifications that would include sea level rise, ocean acidification and the impact of climate change on ecosystems, but this was left out of the final version.

The changes are not set to take effect until mid-September, but several environmental groups have planned to take the White House to court, as have a number of states, including California and Massachusetts.

The Trump administration’s overhaul of the Endangered Species Act comes after a UN report last May which estimated that up to one million plants and animal species are threatened with extinction because of human activity and climate change.

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