

## What is the Latest on Endangered Species Changes?

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**ABSTRACT** I address whether the new Administration will impact the Endangered Species Act. In general, the regulations under the Act have not changed and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will continue operating under the same statutory and regulatory framework as in the past. We focus on making the act work better and are working on a strategic plan to 1) focus species recovery actions strategically and 2) to avoid the need to list species by conserving them. Also addressed in this paper is climate change and its impacts on wildlife and its habitats.

**KEY WORDS** changes, endangered species, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

To the students in the audience, yes it is possible to start a career as a student trainee and reach the executive level.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, my first title with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was on-the-job trainee. I am glad I am not competing today with you for a job as your background is much better developed than what I had 20 years ago when I graduated. Today's new employees come with built-in conservation biology, GIS, web design, and many other skills that I learned on the job. Finish those degrees and please check our webpage for opportunities ([www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)). Also consider joining through the Student Career Experience Program or SCEP, or through the Student Temporary Employment Program or STEP. Both programs are very well described in our webpage under the Human Capital link.

So what is new in endangered species conservation? I truly believe that exciting times are coming to the Endangered Species Program and more importantly to conservation in general. Many people ask me about the new Administration and how listed species conservation will change. The

answer is simply that the law and the regulations have not changed. Therefore, we are operating under the same statutory and regulatory framework. Then the follow-up is related to all of the challenges in court and a lot of the press coverage of some decisions made by previous administrations. The bottom line is that each Administration can make some policy choices because there is the decision space for such choices. And that is what all the coverage has been about, particularly as it relates to the regulatory changes finalized regarding Section 7 provisions last January. Congress provided incoming Secretary Salazar with the authority to rescind those regulations and he has exercised that authority meaning that we are operating under the previous regulatory scheme from 1986. In terms of our commitment to conserve and recover these listed species there is no change whatsoever. I have seen a few Administrations in my career and one concept holds true, each one has an element of change. What I have seen in my almost 20 years with USFWS is a continuous evolution on how to better partner and coordinate activities to achieve synergy and leverage resources to achieve meaningful conservation. I do not expect this trend to change. In fact, I welcome it because I have seen how meaningful conservation can be achieved when entities rally around

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common conservation goals and leverage resources (e.g., funds, experience, expertise, information, and outreach capacity).

Many people also ask me about reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and how likely is it that a new law will be passed. The ESA has not been reauthorized since 1992 and in my opinion it is highly unlikely that a new law will be developed and passed. Listed species conservation has become highly controversial as an issue. My expectation is that until implementation becomes simpler and we do a better job of sharing our understanding of the need for these conservation actions and actually achieve more recovery, the support needed for such a monumental action is going to be lacking.

So what are we doing about making the act work better? When Secretary Salazar addressed the Department of Interior workforce he was very clear about his intent to make the act work better. In fact, he made statements to the effect that the ESA is an important law and that it works, we only need to make it work better. I know we will have the necessary support to move the program forward and find ways to engage the public and important partners like the states and the tribes to explore the possibilities.

We have also been working on a strategic plan to improve our approach to endangered species management. This plan is a very simple framework with two basic goals: focus recovery actions strategically and avoid the need to list species by conserving them, thus obviating the need for protections under the ESA. Although our precious experience has not been the best in terms of recovering species, with only a handful of recovered species, we must keep in mind that recovery takes time and some of these species have been impacted for many decades and the protections of the ESA have only been in

place for about 35 years. Most importantly, it is of critical importance that we pursue these goals ensuring complete and total cooperation and collaboration with the states, tribes, other agencies (both federal and state) and non-governmental organizations. The foundation needs to be on the leveraging of resources, expertise and experience and the resulting synergy of purpose and effort will enhance our success significantly.

Certainly, this is consistent with the USFWS Landscape Conservation Cooperatives approach for conservation within which we will be focusing our resources and those of others to common conservation goals and priorities. Following a strategic habitat conservation approach is the most productive and effective way to ensure success of our conservation efforts. But conservation of listed species cannot be the sole responsibility of the Endangered Species Program. Other USFWS programs contribute significantly to these efforts.

Before closing let me make a comment about climate change; it is real! We are already experiencing its impacts on wildlife and its habitats. The polar bear listing caught the attention of most people, but that is just one example. We have made other findings where climate change has been implicated as a cause of imperilment (e.g., Rio Grande cutthroat trout). We must use all of our resources and build the necessary capacity to develop the science to help us manage through this new challenge in conservation. The USFWS is very focused and committed to ensuring that science is developed and we are developing the necessary capacity to be full partners in these efforts. Thank you and please join us and help us figure out ways to address the climate change challenge we all face in conserving our natural resources.