

Bush administration proposes major cut to endangered species protections

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With an eye to the approaching elections, the Bush administration has drafted proposed changes to the enforcement of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that would take effect within 30 days and would not require the approval of Congress.

Once enacted, the new rules would essentially cut out the role of government scientists at the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service in reviewing the threats to endangered wildlife by dam, highway, mining, drilling and other projects. Instead, political appointees in various federal agencies responsible for overseeing such construction and extraction projects would be empowered to gauge environmental impacts.

The proposal is yet another effort by the Bush administration to dismantle environmental protections that remain as impediments to big business. It is also an undisguised attempt to negate the most modest acknowledgment of the problem of global warming.

Under the proposed rules, federal agencies would not be required to produce any estimate of the consequences of projects' contributions to greenhouse gas emissions.

More significantly, the new rules would nullify the recent classification of the polar bear as a threatened species because of the melting of the polar ice cap—attributed with virtual unanimity to global warming, caused by greenhouse gas emissions. Among the largest emitters of greenhouse gases are power plants and other large-scale industrial operations.

US government data suggests that two-thirds of the polar bear population will be lost by 2050 due to ice loss. By classifying the polar bear as endangered, the federal government was obligated to take formal, if minimal, steps to prevent the destruction of the animal's habitat.

In a call with reporters Monday, Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne sought to portray the new proposal as a “narrow regulatory change” that “will provide clarity and certainty to the consultation process under the Endangered Species Act.”

It is clear, however, that the express purpose of the rule is to weaken ESA protections. According to a report Tuesday by the *Washington Post*, “In a statement yesterday, the Interior Department declared that even if a federal action such as the permitting of a power plant would lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions, the decision would not trigger a federal review ‘because it is not possible to link the emissions to impacts on specific listed species such as polar bears.’”

There is little doubt that the ESA proposal originates from the highest levels of the Bush administration. According to the Associated Press, which obtained a copy of the draft, the proposal is expected to be formally announced in the next few days by the Commerce Department and the Department of the Interior—the decisions of which vice-president Dick Cheney is intimately involved.

Last year, Cheney came under Congressional investigation for interference with ESA enforcement in California and Oregon after promoting a water plan favorable to the ranching industry. The business-tailored plan resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of threatened salmon in the Klamath River.

The Department of Homeland Security has also violated the ESA in its ongoing border wall construction along the US-Mexico border. DHS secretary Michael Chertoff recently invoked his official powers to waive environmental regulations over the department's activities.

The Bush administration's continual attacks on environmental protections flow from its role as the

representative of the US ruling elite in a period of capitalist decline. Whatever gets in the way of the interests of big business must be pushed aside, be that obstacle scientific integrity, the federal regulatory framework, public health—or ultimately environmental viability and human life.



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