



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

EMBARGOED UNTIL NOON

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### ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES WILL MAKE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT USER-FRIENDLY AND IMPROVE BENEFITS TO AT-RISK SPECIES

Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and D. James Baker, Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, today announced a series of new policies aimed at improving the Endangered Species Act's effectiveness while making it easier for Americans to work with and understand. These changes in the way the Federal government administers the Endangered Species Act will make the Act more effective in recovering listed species and enhance its flexibility for businesses and private landowners.

Among changes announced today are policies that minimize the social and economic impact of recovery planning under the Act; provide independent scientific peer review of listing and recovery decisions; require agencies implementing the Act to identify quickly and clearly activities on private lands that may be affected by a listing decision; create cooperative, ecosystem-based approaches to conserve listed and candidate species before crises arise; establish guidelines to ensure decisions made under the Act represent the best available scientific information; and provide a greater role for state agencies, with a closer relationship between Federal and state officials.

In addition, President Clinton has asked the Interior and Commerce departments to convene an interagency working group to recommend additional ways to improve administration of the Act.

The 1973 Endangered Species Act is designed to identify, protect, and facilitate recovery of species facing extinction. The two Federal agencies with primary responsibility for implementing the Act are the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Commerce Department's National Marine Fisheries Service.

"This Administration is committed to an Endangered Species Act that works," said Babbitt. "These changes reflect the growing recognition that we must act more effectively to preserve this country's endangered species, but we must do it in a way that involves all Americans who have a stake in the outcome."

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"Our commitment to the principles of the Endangered Species Act is a reflection of the high value we place on biological diversity," said Baker. "Without compromising our ability to protect unique plants and animals, we have found many ways to implement this Act and lessen the impact on local communities and cultures."

A main focus of the new policies is strengthened cooperation between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. In addition, the policies emphasize closer communication and cooperation with other Federal agencies, state and local officials, non-governmental groups, and private citizens.

"These reforms are a solid step in the right direction," said Sen. Max Baucus (D-Montana), Chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. "If implemented properly, this reform package should produce better conservation decisions that cost society less and win more public support."

"Critics of the Endangered Species Act have often said that listing decisions must be based on sound science," said Rep. Gerry E. Studds (D-Massachusetts), Chairman of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee. "With today's announcement, the Administration is moving aggressively toward that goal."

To ensure the scientific analysis of information used by the Services to list and recover species is as comprehensive as possible, a new policy establishes an independent peer review process. The Services will solicit expert opinion of three independent specialists to analyze data on which listings are based. The peer review process will also be used during development of recovery plans.

In addition, guidelines have been established to guarantee that the information used to implement the Act represents the best data available.

"By law, decisions under the Endangered Species Act must be made on the best available scientific and commercial information. The two new information policies lend further credence to our commitment to sound decision-making," said Baker.

Under another new policy, designed to minimize any social and economic effects of recovery planning, the composition of recovery planning teams will be expanded beyond the scientific community to include other areas of expertise. The Services have always solicited public input during recovery planning. However, including representatives of local interests on recovery teams

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will ensure recovery decisions are both scientifically sound and sensitive to human needs. The goal is to reduce the likelihood of economic disruption caused by recovery activities while ensuring that species recover.

"As one of the nation's largest private timberland owners, we applaud the leadership of Secretary Babbitt and Under Secretary Baker," said John F. Rasor, Vice-President for Georgia Pacific Corp. "Georgia Pacific stands ready to provide leadership to the much-needed dialogue to make the Endangered Species Act work faster and better."

Another policy, designed to ease concern about use of private land when a species is listed, requires the Services to identify immediately those actions permissible under the Act and those that could be violations. This information would be provided in the final listing rule, along with a Service contact for landowners uncertain about activities not delineated in the rule.

"These proposals are a good first step toward restoring public confidence in the Endangered Species Act," said Rep. Vic Fazio (D-California), a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development. "Expanding the membership of recovery teams to include those most directly affected by listing will help create plans that reflect real world conditions. I applaud the recognition of the value of a coherent Federal planning process that incorporates the local perspective."

In an effort to improve coordination with State agencies, the Services will consult states on candidate species identification, monitoring, and development of prelisting actions; listing decisions; and recovery activities, including development of recovery plans.

The Services will also emphasize multi-species listings and recovery plans for species sharing the same ecosystem. The agencies will work closely with other Federal agencies, states, and Tribal and private groups to conserve candidate species before listing is needed.

"Communities, businesses, and landowners need to plan their futures with reasonable confidence, and that is why we are shifting the focus away from individual species and toward the concept of ecosystems," Babbitt said.

"By looking at the big picture, by focusing our resources and efforts on ecosystems rather than individual species, we can

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get away from crisis management where our choices are limited and our costs are high," added Mollie Beattie, Fish and Wildlife Service Director.

The interagency working group established to review the Endangered Species Act will seek the participation of all other Federal agencies to identify additional administrative changes. Input from the states, county and local governments, and private citizens will also be sought.

"The timing of these reforms is helpful to the Senate Subcommittee on Clean Water, Fisheries and Wildlife as we begin our series of reauthorization hearings this summer," said Sen. Bob Graham (D-Florida), Chairman of the Subcommittee. "I am particularly pleased to see the Administration's emphasis on the ecosystem approach to the protection of threatened and endangered species and to its sensitivity to the need for science and the important role of the states."

"This is still the beginning of an ongoing process to identify changes we can make under existing authority in how the Act is implemented," Babbitt said. "The task force will likely make more changes once their review is complete. The steps we have taken today are a sign that we are serious about improving this Act."

The new policies will become effective upon publication in the Federal Register. Publication is expected shortly.