



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Final Position Statement

The U.S. Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 is a fundamentally sound and vital tool in the U.S. effort to conserve biological diversity. The law has been successful in achieving its primary goal of preventing species extinctions. Very few of the more than nearly 2,000 species (including subspecies and vertebrate populations) protected by the ESA have been declared extinct. Based on the risk of extinction, it is estimated that many times this number may have become extinct without the ESA.

Although only about 20 U.S. species have been declared recovered and removed from the ESA lists, most species are listed because of habitat loss and threats that require significant time, funding, and commitment to reverse through restoration, enhancement, management, or protection. In addition, most plants and animals are listed at a point when population sizes and a number of populations have already reached critically low levels. For half of listed vertebrate species, fewer than 1,000 individuals were estimated to exist at the point when they were first protected under the ESA. Even more ominous, half of the plant species were estimated to have had fewer than 120 individuals remaining when they were first listed under the ESA. Recovery of species with so few remaining individuals is clearly more difficult, requires more time, and costs more. Listing rare and declining species before they reach such critically low levels would provide more ecologically, socially, and economically viable options for conservation efforts and would increase the probability and speed of recovery.

For most species, recovery has been historically constrained by insufficient funding levels. Improvements in status of listed species are correlated positively with number of years of protection under the ESA, amount of funding, and number of recovery plan tasks completed. Greater commitment and integration of federal, tribal, state, local, and private resources will be needed to increase the effectiveness of the ESA in achieving its goals of preventing extinction and recovering species.

A more effective ESA must be complemented by broader societal commitments to fully address larger sociocultural and socioeconomic issues that frequently drive species extinction and recovery. The focus of the ESA is on encouraging recovery through preventing take of listed species; moving forward, the ESA must adapt to also include and encourage proactive measures to identify and conserve critical components of landscapes. Managing and recovering endangered species will be even more challenging in the context of climate change, which may alter natural systems and pose unanticipated threats to some species, requiring re-ordering of priorities for recovery.

The policy of The Wildlife Society regarding the ESA is to:

1. Support maintaining the firm statutory duties and strong substantive standards in the current law and actively promote their consistent interpretation to prevent extinctions and recover species.
2. Support efforts to increase effectiveness of threatened and endangered species conservation under the ESA through improvements to and consistent interpretation of the law, and its funding, administrative implementation, and integration with efforts by other parties, and an increased emphasis on landscape-level conservation.
3. Encourage commitment of greater federal, tribal, regional, state, local, and private resources to the purposes of the ESA through outreach, collaboration, education and support for financial and regulatory incentives.
4. Promote more efficient use of existing resources through efforts to lower ESA transactional costs, particularly in listing decisions and critical habitat designations.
5. Support dedicated federal funding for surveys and monitoring to better ascertain the status of species at risk. Upon acceptance of a petition for listing, encourage data sharing from federal, tribal, regional, state, local and private entities to document the species' current status.
6. Support adequate funding under section 6 of the ESA to assist states in building a strong partnership for conservation of candidate, threatened, and endangered species and for appropriate monitoring of delisted species.
7. Encourage greater partnerships with state fish and wildlife agencies, Native American tribes, local governments, private landowners, and NGOs in carrying out complementary conservation efforts on private and other nonfederal lands to recover listed species and prevent the need to list additional species.
8. Support with scientific expertise the development of recovery plan biological objectives, quantitative interim and final recovery targets, and assessments of whether an implementation strategy is likely to achieve biological goals, with a broader set of participants contributing to the development of an implementation strategy to achieve those goals.
9. Encourage federal agencies to expand proactive and consistent efforts at all levels of management to conserve endangered, threatened, and other at-risk species using existing authorities, as required by ESA section 7(a)(1).
10. Support the designation of critical habitat and measures to restore, enhance, manage, and protect all occupied and unoccupied habitats on public lands that are essential to recover endangered and threatened species and work with landowners to achieve the same objectives on private lands. When a species' recovery is deemed dependent on protection

of particular habitats, these habitats should be identified in a spatially explicit manner within that species' recovery plan.

11. Support establishment of market-based strategies including tax incentives, conservation credits, simpler safe harbor agreements, and expanded use of Farm Bill conservation programs and Interior Department private lands programs to assist and encourage private landowner actions contributing to recovery of listed species or conservation of species that are candidates for listing. For example, support reinstatement of the Landowner Incentive Program, a program specifically designed to incentivize and assist private landowners in the conservation of listed species, or development of a similar program.
12. Assure that decisions under the ESA are transparent, replicable, and based on robust analyses of the best scientific data available.
13. Encourage federal ESA decision-makers to solicit and use the expertise of state fish and wildlife agencies, Native American tribes, and others in a consistent and open manner.
14. Encourage federal agencies to work with ESA decision-makers, state fish and wildlife agencies, and other experts from the scientific community in section 7 interagency consultations to resolve areas of scientific disagreement or uncertainty during development of biological assessments and to design actions conservatively when faced with scientific uncertainty about project impacts or the adequacy of offsetting measures.
15. Support strong funding for the State Wildlife Grants program and encourage broad governmental and non-governmental partnerships in the implementation of State Wildlife Action Plans as one mechanism to slow the addition of new species to the federal list of threatened and endangered species.

Approved by Council August 2011. Expires August 2016.