

EPA in need of overseeing - Pesticide plan a new threat to endangered species

June 13, 2004

Since 1973, the Endangered Species Act has provided a safety net for America's wildlife on the brink of extinction, ensuring that our children and grandchildren will have more to enjoy when they venture outdoors than paved roads and tall buildings.

The bald eagle, an emblem of our great country, is one of the Endangered Species Act's greatest success stories. So are the black-footed ferret and another Arizona favorite, the desert tortoise. So why, after 30 years of success, does the Bush administration want to weaken the Endangered Species Act with a proposal that would allow companies to use dangerous pesticides without properly assessing their impact on protected species?

Under this proposal, the Environmental Protection Agency could approve pesticide use without having to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service about possible harm that use might pose to imperiled wildlife, as is the current policy. In other words, the biologists and wildlife experts who are currently consulted on wildlife impacts before pesticide use is approved would be cut out of the loop.

The EPA's track record in safeguarding wildlife from pesticides is lacking. Because pesticides often travel from one level in the food chain up to the next, they can have damaging effects on many species that never come into direct contact with them. Farmworkers in Arizona who toil in pesticide-laden fields, and their children, who often work and play in the fields, are especially at risk for pesticide poisoning. Local fish and game birds and animals often suffer from pesticide use as well.

There are several other well-documented incidences of pesticides unintentionally poisoning threatened and endangered wildlife, and even children. For example, most of the more than 48,000 reported poisonings of children younger than 6 last year were traced back to the rat poison Brodifacoum, the same culprit that killed several endangered San Joaquin kit foxes and golden eagles in California.

Amphibians, which have porous skin that makes them sensitive to chemical changes in their environment, are especially vulnerable to pesticides. Pesticides are carried by wind and do damage to amphibian species in various places. Drifting pesticides come back to earth through rainwater and can be soaked up through amphibians' delicate skin.

Several species of leopard frog are endangered in Arizona and are dependent on strong Endangered Species Act protections. The Tarahumara frog, which disappeared from the state more than 20 years ago, is being reintroduced next month, according to the Arizona office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A relaxation of endangered species protections could be devastating to these species.

This stifling of the act's progress does not have to take place. U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., is taking a stand on Capitol Hill in protecting wildlife from harmful pesticides. He has written a letter to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Leavitt, Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton and Commerce Secretary Don Evans, expressing concern about these proposed changes to pesticide regulation. He is urging his congressional colleagues to sign the letter and join him in support of continuing strong safeguards for threatened and endangered wildlife in America.

All living things are interconnected in the web of life. Once we start pulling even one thread of this web apart we are ultimately hurting ourselves and future generations.

The time is now for our representatives in Congress to show that they care about keeping the Endangered Species Act strong.

Mike Perkinson is the president of the Arizona Wildlife Federation.