



Taxpayers' costs for ESA would double under Pombo plan, CBO says

ENDANGERED SPECIES

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The cost of protecting imperiled plants and animals would more than double under the House Resources Committee's plan for overhauling the **Endangered Species Act**, congressional budget analysts said today.

The Congressional Budget Office attributed the higher price tag to the costs of developing and administering new financial assistance programs for landowners, modifying regulations and meeting new planning deadlines set out in the bill.

Overall, the proposal would cost the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Agriculture's plant inspection service a total of about \$2.7 billion over the next five years, CBO said.

The bill's chief sponsor, Resources Chairman Richard Pombo (R-Calif.), has conceded his measure would likely require a bigger budget for the agencies, but he has defended the higher numbers, saying landowners are already bearing the costs of **species** protection by paying out of their own pockets to meet the existing law's requirements.

Congress appropriated \$234 million for FWS's traditional ESA activities for fiscal year 2005. That figure represents the administrative costs and the actual ESA line item, but not the total federal spending for different **species** conservation programs, like other cooperative grants, or the full cost of litigation.

The Pombo bill includes a host of landowner protections and payments. It would throw out the **act's** current "critical habitat" provisions and replace them with recovery plan requirements.

The proposal also includes requirements that the Interior Department respond within 180 days to landowner inquiries on development they would like to undertake on their land. If development, farming or other activities are halted, federal officials must pay the property owners for any value lost.

The bill's critics have said compensating property owners would cost billions, but CBO estimated the cost of the landowner payments would be less than \$10 million over the next five years.

The CBO number is lower than many expected, in part, because of predicted delays in putting the administrative mechanisms for the law in place, processing landowner requests and resolving how the law should be interpreted. The CBO analysis said the cost of landowner payments in future years could be "much more significant, despite the likely small size of individual payments, because the volume of requests could be very large at first."

After 2010, CBO said, landowners payments would likely average less than \$20 million per year.

House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.), who is planning to offer an alternative plan when the bill comes to the floor tomorrow morning, and different environmental groups opposing the bill said today those costs could be too high.

"The chairman has always said that he would increase the funding for **species** recovery efforts if the law was updated and repaired," said Resources Committee spokesman Brian Kennedy. "To throw more money at the law before reform, in his opinion, would be like putting a new set of tires on a car that doesn't run."



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