

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

April 21, 2008

:: OPINIONS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR online print edition



Strange bedfellows

Nov. 8, 2007 12:00 AM

The Endangered Species Act has been called the strongest environmental law on the planet. It also has been called a lot of things we can't publish in a family newspaper.

The controversy and conflict that arises when an endangered species is found on private land has been a huge problem. Too many disagreements wind up in court because environmental interests feel a recovery plan is too weak and a private landowner feels unfairly burdened.

The shouting matches can be quite impassioned.

Turn down the volume and you'll find most people do agree with the larger goal of preserving species. Our nation's natural heritage is a source of pride for a great many people of all philosophical bents.

A scheme to help preserve biological diversity that pleases both environmental groups and land-use groups would be quite an accomplishment.

Congress has a chance to approve such a plan.

The Endangered Species Recovery Act of 2007 has broad support, including the Environmental Defense Fund, National Wildlife Federation and Defenders of Wildlife on one side and the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Society of American Foresters and a coalition that includes the National Association of Home Builders on the other. Some of these groups have faced off in court. This approach gives them a chance to work together.

Introduced in both the House (HR 1422) and Senate (S 700), this proposal creates tax incentives for private landowners, primarily farmers and ranchers, who proactively preserve or enhance habitat for threatened or endangered species. Agreements that earn tax credits can include restrictions on how land is used.

The goal remains species preservation, but this is a cooperative model instead of an adversarial one. It makes an endangered species a benefit to the landowner instead of a liability.

The bill has moved through Senate committees in two forms. One is a stand-alone version, which we strongly support. It has also been tacked onto the massive farm bill, which creates unnecessary complications.

This bill deserves to be considered on its own merits.

In the House, there has been little movement. Arizona's Rep. Raúl Grijalva, whose support of the bill reflects his long-standing commitment to the environment, should urge his fellow representatives to get going.

Congress should not miss this opportunity to pass a cooperative approach to environmental protection.