

Bill Berrien: A defense bill is no place for endangered species act rollbacks

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Protecting our nation's environment and wildlife is important. So is protecting our national security. As a former Navy SEAL officer and a current trustee for the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, I know that these two issues are not at odds. On the contrary, there are many examples of military bases/installations providing much needed habitat and protections for wildlife. However, this could soon change if some in Congress have their way.

Congress is working to finalize the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which sets annual funding and personnel levels as well as governs programs and policies for the Department of Defense (DoD).

Both the House and Senate have passed their own versions, and lawmakers are now getting ready for the formal conference between the two chambers (anticipated for later this month) to iron out differences between the two approved bills.

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But amidst these deliberations of how to best fund our armed forces and national security are a series of proposals to undermine two of our nation's bedrock environmental laws.

The House's NDAA bill includes several riders seeking to weaken the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The ESA-focused riders target the listings of three species — the greater sage grouse, lesser prairie chicken, and American burying beetle — putting arbitrary

restrictions on possible future protections for the birds, while proposing the unprecedented and damaging step of legislatively delisting and outright banning ESA protections for the beetle.

Meanwhile, the NEPA-focused riders aim to weaken NEPA's environmental and public process reviews for actions on federal public lands, including rolling back requirements on hard rock mining and allowing state and local reviews to supplant federal land management decisions.

What all these proposals have in common is that they have nothing to do with national security.

At their core, these are attacks on ESA and NEPA that jeopardize the effectiveness of both laws and open the door to similar erosions in the future.

Critical decisions about species and environmental protections should be based on science and made through a public process, not by legislative fiat from Congress.

These proposals, if included in the final bill, would undercut two of America's most important environmental laws.

Weakening these protections is a bad idea in itself, but to bury these proposals in a massive and unrelated piece of legislation where they will unlikely see much debate is misguided.

Bedrock conservation and environmental laws like NEPA and the ESA are essential to conservation and a sustainable future.

Together these foundational environmental laws have given the public a greater voice in government decisions and conserved our fish, wildlife, and other natural resources for the benefit of future generations of Americans.

This legacy of leadership in environmental protection should not go backwards, especially in a bill intended to provide for our national security.

Please join us in calling on lawmakers NOT to include these provisions in the final NDAA bill.

Only then will we ensure both our national defense and environmental protections remain intact.

— *Berrien, of New Berlin, is a former Navy SEAL and is a trustee for the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy.*