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Changes in Environmental Reviews Are Sought

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Bush administration is proposing to let federal agencies decide for themselves whether highways, dams, mines and other construction projects might harm endangered animals and plants, according to a draft of planned rule changes obtained by The Associated Press.

The proposed regulations, which do not require the approval of Congress, would reduce the mandatory, independent reviews that government scientists have been performing for 35 years.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said late Monday that the changes were needed to ensure that the Endangered Species Act not be used as a “back door” to regulate the heat-trapping gases linked to global warming.

The draft rules would bar federal agencies from assessing the emissions from projects that contribute to global warming and its effect on species and habitats.

“We need to focus our efforts where they will do the most good,” Mr. Kempthorne said in a news conference organized quickly after The A.P. reported details of the proposal.

“It is important to use our time and resources to protect the most vulnerable species,” he added. “It is not possible to draw a link between greenhouse-gas emissions and distant observations of impacts on species.”

If approved, the changes would represent the biggest overhaul of endangered species regulations since 1986. They would accomplish through rules what conservative Republicans have been unable to achieve in Congress: ending some environmental reviews that developers and other federal agencies blame for delays and cost increases on many projects.

Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat of California and chairwoman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, called the proposed changes illegal.

The new rules were expected to be formally proposed immediately, officials said. They would be subject to a 30-day public comment period before being made final by the Interior Department.

A new administration could freeze any pending regulations or reverse them, a process that could take months. Congress could also overturn the rules through legislation, but that could take even longer.