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NATURAL RESOURCES

Lawmakers seek solutions to biodiversity crisis

Michael Doyle, E&E News reporter • Published: Thursday, May 20, 2021



Scientists say the vaquita porpoise, found in Mexico's Gulf of California, could become extinct in the near future. Notimex/Newscom

Confronted with grim reminders about vulnerable species, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee yesterday prepared the soil for future legislative and budgetary actions on protecting biodiversity.

First, the bad news.

"More species of plants and animals are threatened with extinction now than at any other time in human history," Arizona State University professor Leah Gerber told the panel. "Twenty-five percent of all species, including 40% of amphibians and 30% of marine mammals, are threatened with extinction."

Gerber was lead author of a 2019 U.N.-requested study warning that approximately 1 million species worldwide were at risk of extinction in coming decades.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services study reported that "human actions threaten more species with global extinction now than ever before."

"Without [concerted] action, there will be a further acceleration in the global rate of species extinction, which is already at least tens to hundreds of times higher than it has averaged over the past 10 million years," the [report](#) said.

Lawmakers yesterday called that report and similar testimony a kind of alarm bell.

"Though the current state of biodiversity decline paints a bleak picture for the future, there is hope," said Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.), adding that "this is an issue on which our committee has a bipartisan record of success."

Carper, the committee's chair, cited the passage last year of reauthorizations for programs to conserve wildlife and habitat at home and abroad, as well as inclusion of a first-ever wildlife crossings safety section in a highway bill.

With the Biden administration set to release its full fiscal 2022 budget proposal next week, Carper added that "we must also ensure that the federal budget provides robust funding for wildlife protection."

Gerber offered additional ideas, such as encouraging corporate disclosure on biodiversity impacts and reporting progress toward sustainable development goals.

"By acknowledging that biodiversity is the foundation of social and economic systems, we can begin to mainstream the value of biodiversity into national and subnational budgets, policy planning and implementation," Gerber said.

Andy Trehame, senior director of external affairs for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, urged passage of the "Recovering America's Wildlife Act," [H.R. 2773](#), which he said would provide "much-needed funding to state fish and wildlife agencies [and] mark a historic step toward addressing biodiversity loss" ([E&E Daily](#), April 23).

The bill would provide \$1.3 billion annually to state fish and wildlife agencies to implement their wildlife action plans and an additional \$97.5 million for tribal fish and wildlife managers to conserve fish and wildlife in tribal lands and waters.

Edmund Sullivan, executive officer of California's Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency, championed "landscape-scale" habitat conservation plans, which streamline economic development while protecting wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

"The Western Riverside County Multi-species HCP ... expedited a new Metrolink rail line, two new freeways, and six major freeway widening projects and resulted in conserving 33 federal and state listed species and 500,000 acres of wildlife habitat," Sullivan noted.

Several Democrats in January reintroduced a nonbinding House resolution calling for the drafting of a national biodiversity strategy ([E&E Daily](#), Jan. 29).

Citing an "unprecedented biodiversity crisis," Reps. Joe Neguse of Colorado and Alan Lowenthal and Jared Huffman of California said they sought a "road map for establishing a robust, whole-of-government approach" to protecting ecosystems.

The House resolution envisions a strategy "developed through an interagency process," with federal agencies encouraged to "pursue a full range of actions within existing laws" and to consider new ones.

At the international level, the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity has been ratified by 196 nation-states and the European Union. The United States is the exception.

Last year, then-Rep. Deb Haaland (D) of New Mexico, who is now Interior secretary, said she would "encourage every single tribal nation, because they're sovereign governments, to sign on, because these are ways that we can move this forward."

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