Reps. Ron Kind (D. WI) and Walter Jones (R. NC) have introduced a new bill, dubbed the America's Wildlife Heritage Act (H.R. 2807), in the House. The bill is intended to shift the balance of power over the nation's multiple-use lands (those managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management) a bit away from extractive uses toward wildlife conservation.

Current laws leave the land management agencies with a great deal of discretion about how to strike the balance between resource extraction, recreation, and conservation. Species not listed as threatened or endangered enjoy essentially no statutory protection on BLM lands, and very little on national forest lands. The main forest management law, the National Forest Management Act, directs the Forest Service to "provide for diversity of plant and animal communities," but that's a slender reed. Until recently, the national forest planning rules required the Forest Service to maintain viable populations of native and desired non-native species, but the current planning rules provide no such specific direction.

This bill would give wildlife management on the federal lands a higher profile by stating that,

> consistent with long-standing principles of multiple use and sustained yield management, the goal of sustaining the diverse fish, wildlife, and plant communities that depend on our Federal public lands should guide the stewardship of America's public lands.

And it would provide a limit on the land management agencies' ability to trade off wildlife protection for other uses of the lands under their jurisdiction:

> Each Secretary shall plan for and manage planning areas under the Secretary's respective jurisdiction in order to maintain sustainable populations of native species and desired non-native species within each planning area, except that management for desired non-native species shall not interfere with the maintenance of sustainable populations of native species within a planning area.

Sustainable populations are defined as populations with a high likelihood of persistence throughout the species' range in the planning area for at least 50 years.

If conditions beyond the management agencies' control (think global warming, or poor management of private lands) make it impossible to maintain sustainable populations, the management agency must do the best it can for the species.

The bill would also mandate monitoring programs to track the status and trends of focal species and species of concern, instead of leaving decisions about monitoring to individual management plans. And it would direct BLM and the Forest Service to "develop strategies to address the impacts of climate change on native species and desired non-native species."

Given everything else Congress has on its plate this year, and the opposition of the oil and gas industry (see this New York Times story), passage of this bill is a long shot at best. But it's nice to see a bipartisan bill that might at least get the conversation started.