Photo courtesy of Flickr, by mikebaird

The Fish and Wildlife Service today announced some very good news — the brown pelican will soon be removed from the list of endangered and threatened species. This enormous fish-eating bird has been protected since 1970, when it was included on the very first list of US endangered species under a predecessor to the current Endangered Species Act. Its population rebounded after DDT was banned in 1972. By 1985, the pelican had recovered enough to justify delisting along the Atlantic coast. Now the Service has determined that populations are also stable off the Gulf and Pacific Coasts, such that the species as a whole no longer needs the protection of the ESA. Lest that judgment be wrong, the Act requires that the Service monitor the pelican's status for at least five years after delisting.

The success of the ESA should never be measured by the number of species delisted. Many species will need perpetual protection against ongoing threats, and often the ESA is the only law that can provide that protection. But it is truly grounds for celebration when we can identify and control key threats sufficiently to have confidence that an iconic species like the brown pelican can once again thrive on our coasts without special protection.

UPDATE: The final rule delisting the brown pelican was published in the Federal Register on November 17. It will become effective on December 17. (For an easier-to-read pdf version, see here.)