Renewed Emphasis on Endangered Species Works to Clear Backlogs and Broaden Collaboration

Federal wildlife agencies have committed to clear lengthy backlogs of candidate species for listing as threatened or endangered, and the electric power industry, with assets that literally criss-cross the country, has deep interests in ensuring that listing decisions are scientifically sound. In response, EPRI is working with the industry and regulators to develop constructive, collaborative approaches to collecting scientific data and advancing research on at-risk species and their habitats.

"The electric power sector is in a period of restructuring, and there's concern about how new species listings might impact both existing operations and changes in the transmission grid and generation sources," said EPRI Senior Technical Executive Robert Goldstein. "EPRI is developing the knowledge base to support technically sound decision making and conservation plans."

EPRI researchers are working to cooperate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the agencies charged with decisions on listing species as endangered on land and in coastal waters, respectively. "EPRI is not interested in contesting agency decisions," said Goldstein. Rather, the number of species up for consideration has challenged agency resources. EPRI is collaborating to identify research gaps, particularly for candidate species whose habitats are affected by electric utility facilities and operations, and to compile existing scientific data on candidate species that are most relevant to EPRI members.

EPRI is evaluating one approach called "Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs)." These negotiated agreements may preclude the need for formal listing, and lower the costs for species' protection, by creating plans to manage an ecosystem to benefit multiple species. EPRI also is examining the concept of critical habitat and its application. Though the law requires the agencies to identify each endangered species' critical habitat and bars degradation of such habitats, more than half of all species already listed don't yet have a formal critical habitat designation. Many candidate species are, almost by definition, extremely rare, so some research is being considered to identify *surrogate species*—similar animals and plants that can be studied to augment data on the rarer species. Goldstein said research involves developing scientific methodologies for identifying potentially endangered species and their habitats.

A key goal of EPRI's work is to develop a collaborative forum in which federal agencies and stakeholders can discuss both critical challenges and opportunities for cooperative actions prior to listing decisions. Workshops with federal officials, Goldstein said, have helped EPRI identify areas in which research can provide scientific data that federal agencies need for their decisions.

Goldstein expects such cooperative approaches to become increasingly important. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued guidance indicating that it will consult with FWS and NMFS on water intake and discharge permits for generating plants. "Basically we are going to see a whole new level of FWS involvement," Goldstein said.