

# Baker City Herald

DECEMBER 17, 2007

## Bush butts in on the experts' work

We hope President Bush understands, in the wake of the sage grouse debacle, how ridiculous it is to try to rein in scientists who work for federal agencies by assigning as their boss a politically reliable, but scientifically ignorant, figurehead.

Bush botched the sage grouse situation from the start.

In 2005 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided the sage grouse, a chicken-size bird that's native to much of the arid West, including Baker County, did not need the protection of the Endangered Species Act.

It turns out, though, that that decision was not based solely on the opinions of sage grouse experts. Not their unedited opinions, anyway.

An investigation of the agency, the results of which were released recently, showed that Julie MacDonald, whom Bush appointed as a deputy assistant director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, had not only revised scientists' reports, but also personally pressured them.

MacDonald also interfered in similar fashion in studies of six other species that were candidates for federal protection, according to investigators.

This is indefensible.

What's particularly galling, though, about Bush's appointment of MacDonald is that it means the people who could be affected by the final decision about sage grouse — including some Baker County residents — will have to wait at least a couple more years to find out what the effects might be.

That's because a federal judge who reviewed the MacDonald case ordered the Fish and Wildlife Service to reconsider its 2005 decision to not list the sage grouse as threatened or endangered.

The ramifications locally could be significant. Because the sage grouse, as its name implies, depends on sagebrush for food and shelter, activities that degrade sagebrush habitat, including livestock grazing and off-road vehicle travel, could be curtailed to protect sage grouse.

According to studies done by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, sage grouse populations have been relatively stable in Baker County over the past several years.

It might be that the birds don't need federal protection, at least around here.

But that's a decision for experts to make.

We hope that this time Bush lets them make it.