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Investigators rap Interior official

By John Heilprin (AP)

WASHINGTON -- A Bush administration official who worked against federal protection for the sage grouse was criticized this week by the Interior Department's internal watchdog.

Julie MacDonald, the deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, has repeatedly altered scientific field reports to minimize protection for imperiled species, Interior Inspector General Earl Devaney concluded. She also broke federal rules and could face administrative sanctions for leaking nonpublic federal information about endangered species to private industry groups.

MacDonald acknowledged that on several occasions she released internal information from the Interior Department and Environmental Protection Agency into private hands, including the California Farm Bureau Federation and the Pacific Legal Foundation.

Environmentalists and other critics have charged that MacDonald undermined federal endangered species protections. In the inspector general's report, other Interior officials describe MacDonald as a political appointee bent on manipulating science to fit her policy goals, which favor developers and other industry.

The 2004 decision not to list the sage grouse as an endangered species in December was seen by some as an example of political pressure morphing the findings of scientists.

In a scientific paper discussing the status of the grouse, MacDonald made significant notes in the margins. For example, scientists discussed sagebrush as the winter diet of the grouse, and MacDonald wrote, "they will eat other stuff if it is available."

MacDonald also removed more than 80 percent of the nearly 300 miles of streams that had been under government protection to aid recovering bull trout in the Northwest's Klamath River basin, and she tried to pressure the Fish and Wildlife Service to alter its findings on the Kootenai River sturgeon so that dam operations wouldn't be harmed, the new report said.

Rep. Nick Rahall, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, said he would hold a hearing in May about the report on MacDonald and broader issues it raises.

The hearing will provide "a sweeping review on whether politics is infiltrating decisions" and subverting science in the government's handling of endangered species, said Rahall, D-W.Va., who released Devaney's report.

The findings were first reported by The New York Times in Thursday editions.

Devaney said his office began investigating after an anonymous complaint in April 2006 that MacDonald acted unethically and illegally when she "bullied, insulted and harassed the professional staff" of the Fish and Wildlife Service to alter scientific evidence.

"A lot of that is true," Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall is quoted as saying in the report, adding that he's been in a "running battle" with MacDonald since he took over the service in October 2005.

Devaney said he uncovered no illegal activity by MacDonald, but that she broke federal rules that prohibit the disclosure of private agency information and require public officials to avoid appearing to give anyone preferential treatment.

Twice she sent internal EPA documents to people whose e-mail addresses ended in chevrontexaco.com, the report said.

Devaney referred the matter to other department officials for potential sanctions against her. An Interior Department spokeswoman said the report was being internally reviewed and that officials would have no comment on a personnel issue. MacDonald could not be reached for comment through the spokeswoman.

MacDonald, a hydraulic engineer with a master degree's in management but no background in natural sciences, joined the Bush administration in July 2002 as a senior adviser for fish, wildlife and parks. She was promoted to deputy assistant secretary in 2004.