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Our View

Treachery at Interior

Americans have become almost callously indifferent to the regularity of scandals in the Washington bureaucracy these days.

However, reasons behind the sudden resignation this week of Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Julia MacDonald shocked even thick-skinned oldtimers on the Potomac.

MacDonald, who ran the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, betrayed her oath and the trust of her colleagues by giving industry lobbyists confidential Interior documents; ordering department scientists to rig reports to prevent listing sage grouse as endangered so that Rocky Mountain extraction industries could operate in sage grouse habitat; and ordering a smaller nesting range of the Southwest willow flycatcher so it would not interfere with her husband's California ranch operations.

MacDonald's treachery was the environmentalism equivalent of the CIA finding a Russian spy in its midst. She jumped ship just in time to avoid brutal questioning by investigative congressional committees.

Interior has been a hotbed of duplicitous conduct by political appointees of President Bush. Most of them come from industries they now are supposed to police. But time and again, news reporters and congressmen have discovered these appointees watering down regulatory work affecting their former employers in mining, ranching and lumbering.

One such former industry lobbyist, J. Steven Griles, the former deputy secretary and No. 2 man in Interior, is awaiting sentencing after pleading guilty to perjury about his dealings with convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

What else would be expected of presidential appointees who're the proverbial foxes guarding the chicken house, and whose loyalties are with former employers, not the American public?