

December 6, 2007

Wanted: Some sage advice

The rise of mankind works something like this. People with (widely divergent) opinions engage in (wildly spirited) discourse, reach (frequently contentious) conclusions, then make (enduringly controversial) decisions.

Best case scenario: The result is progress.

Hundreds of years ago, some pretty smart people came up with a way to grease these skids. They called it the scientific method. Their goal was to establish some incontrovertible baselines and, sure enough, we now can anticipate absolutely predictable behavior by everything from molecules and atoms to television reporters forced to stand out in the rain.

Imagine then the reaction to the rather unusual approach taken by one high-ranking federal official charged with reviewing recommendations from scientists on her staff. She struck through all the conclusions she didn't like.

Julie MacDonald, a politically appointed (non-career) deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks in the Interior Department, did exactly that a few years back when she wantonly manipulated evidence before deciding not to list the sage grouse as an endangered species. That earned her a stern rebuke this week from federal Judge B. Lynn Winmill of Idaho who ordered the government to reconsider what he called a "tainted" decision.

We wish this were an isolated case.

It is not.

MacDonald is just the most recent Bush appointee in natural resource agencies caught red-handed ignoring or suppressing the findings of federal professionals. We're not talking here about noodling with scientific nuance. MacDonald's sins ranged from bullying her boots-on-the-ground biologists to leaking internal documents to lobbyists working against the scientific grain.

Our concern here goes far beyond the sage grouse. Yes, we have a certain fondness for a species in which the male's idea of a courtship ritual is puffing out its chest and belching. There remains, by the way, no scientific evidence suggesting this behavior is spurred by the incidence of football on TV. Our concern is that this week's decision raises anew the specter of federal protection for the bird that by some estimates has lost 50 percent of its native habitat in the inland West. And it again throws the people of the rural West into a protracted period of delay and uncertainty, conditions with which they have been forced to become all too familiar.

By breeding uncertainty, MacDonald's misbehavior calls into question the future of everything from cattle grazing on public lands, through oil and gas exploration, to real estate development. It threatens, in other words, the livelihood of communities all across the rural West, communities ravaged by change in their resource-based economies that now are striving to adopt more sustainable practices.

These are places that husband the soul of the American West. They deserve better from their government than lies.