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Report Faults Interior Appointee Landowner Issues Trumped Animal Protections, IG Says

By Juliet Eilperin

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A senior Bush political appointee at the Interior Department has repeatedly altered scientific field reports to minimize protections for imperiled species and disclosed confidential information to private groups seeking to affect policy decisions, the department's inspector general concluded.

The investigator's report on Julie A. MacDonald, deputy assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks -- which was triggered by an anonymous complaint from a Fish and Wildlife Service employee and expanded in October after a Washington Post article about MacDonald -- said she frequently sought to reshape the agency's scientific reports in an effort to ease the impact of agency decisions on private landowners.

Inspector General Earl E. Devaney referred the case to Interior's top officials for "potential administrative action," according to the document, which was reported yesterday in the New York Times.

The IG noted that MacDonald "admitted that her degree is in civil engineering and that she has no formal educational background in natural sciences" but repeatedly instructed Fish and Wildlife scientists to change their recommendations on identifying "critical habitats," despite her lack of expertise.

At one point, according to Fish and Wildlife Service Director H. Dale Hall, MacDonald tangled with field personnel over designating habitat for the endangered Southwestern willow flycatcher, a bird whose range is from Arizona to New Mexico and Southern California. When scientists wrote that the bird had a "nesting range" of 2.1 miles, MacDonald told field personnel to change the number to 1.8 miles. Hall, a wildlife biologist who told the IG he had had a "running battle" with MacDonald, said she did not want the range to extend to California because her husband had a family ranch there.

In another incident described in the report, MacDonald argued with Hall over the Kootenai River sturgeon, a fish in Montana and Idaho that needs a certain level of river flow in order to spawn. Field biologists determined that the sturgeon's needed flow level ranged between 2.3 and 5.9 cubic feet per second, but MacDonald instructed them to cite only the 5.9 figure, which would have aided dam operators. After Hall demanded she put the request in writing, the report noted, "she ultimately relented and they kept the 2.3 to 5.9 range."

Devaney reported that several Fish and Wildlife officials said MacDonald yelled and cursed at them, quoting the assistant manager for California and Nevada operations as saying that his employees "were definitely stressed, pushed and yelled at by MacDonald."

The report also said MacDonald "misused her position" by disclosing confidential documents to "private sector sources" such as the Pacific Legal Foundation and the California Farm Bureau Federation, both of which have challenged endangered-species listings.

On Feb. 4, 2004, MacDonald sent the Pacific Legal Foundation a 147-page document on Interior's critical habitat policies. In an e-mail exchange with one of the foundation's lawyers, MacDonald wrote: "I will send you a copy of the draft but please do not share it with anyone else. It's still undergoing revision, although the fundamental legal/policy approach will not change. Does that work for you?"

MacDonald acknowledged to Devaney that the policy document would not have been released under a Freedom of Information Act request but "said that did not mean she could not release it to a personal friend, the PLF attorney, as long as the attorney would not post the document on the PLF's Web site."

MacDonald was not available for comment yesterday, and Interior Department spokesman Hugh Vickery said he could not comment on the report because it was "a personnel matter."

Kieran Suckling, policy director for the advocacy group Center for Biological Diversity, said the report documented MacDonald's close relationship with industry.

"She has demoralized the entire U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by deriding its scientists, overruling its decision-makers, and showing complete disregard for professional channels of decision making," Suckling said in an e-mail.