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Interior Dept. Official Facing Scrutiny Resigns

By Elizabeth Williamson

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A senior Bush political appointee at the Interior Department who revised scientific reports to minimize protection of endangered species has resigned, officials said yesterday.

Julie A. MacDonald, deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, had been criticized by Interior's inspector general, and Congress was preparing to scrutinize her performance in an upcoming hearing.

Interior Department spokesman Hugh Vickery confirmed MacDonald's resignation, delivered in a letter late Monday. Her departure came as the agency was discussing plans to demote her, said a person in the agency familiar with the matter. Vickery declined to comment on that possibility.

Reached at her home, MacDonald said that she resigned for personal reasons, including an illness in her family, and that "I have nothing but respect for people at the department." She would not comment on whether potential disciplinary action influenced her decision.

Environmental groups late last year documented a pitched battle between MacDonald and Fish and Wildlife Service employees over whether to safeguard plants and animals from oil and gas drilling, power lines, and real estate development.

In March, Inspector General Earl E. Devaney referred MacDonald's case to top Interior officials for possible administrative action. In an investigation, Devaney's office found that MacDonald, who has a degree in civil engineering and no science background, repeatedly instructed Fish and Wildlife scientists to change their recommendations on identifying "critical habitats."

MacDonald often argued with and mocked career staff members and scientist reports for urging that species such as the white-tailed prairie dog and the Gunnison sage grouse be classified as threatened or endangered, documents showed. After reviewing a scientific report on the possibility that a proposed road might further degrade the sage grouse's habitat, MacDonald wrote in the margin: "Has nothing to do with sage grouse. This belongs in a treatise on 'Why roads are bad'?"

Environmental groups praised her departure.

"Increasing transparency in the decision-making process would make other political appointees think twice before altering or distorting scientific documents," said Francesca Grifo, director of the Scientific Integrity Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, which requested the documents under the Freedom of Information Act.