

The Salt Lake Tribune

May 21, 2008

Endangered species will have to 'cling to life' until Bush administration exits, says lawmaker

By Thomas Burr

WASHINGTON - House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Nick Rahall has some advice for the nation's endangered species: try to survive for another eight months.

"At this point," Rahall, D-W.Va., said today, "the best hope for endangered species may simply be to cling to life until after January when this president and his cronies, at long last, hit the unemployment line."

Rahall's scathing remarks came as the Government Accountability Office issued a report which he says shows that, rather than fixing "tinkered" analysis of eight endangered or threatened species - including three with habitat in Utah - the Interior Department instead "swept it under the rug."

The report, released a year after an Interior Department official resigned amid allegations she inappropriately influenced decisions on species being considered for endangered or threatened status, says that Julie McDonald, the former deputy assistant secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, excluded U.S. Forest Service areas and private lands when analyzing the Canada lynx. That threatened species is found in five Utah counties and possibly more.

The report says the agency has since published a federal rule reclassifying the critical habitat for the lynx. But Rahall says the agency hasn't done enough to purge any undue influence in probing whether more needs to be done for endangered species.

Interior spokesman Chris Paolino said Rahall's comments were a "shocker," and that it's the "the net result of presidential elections" that the Interior Department is managed by senior political appointees.

"Obviously, a number of political appointees have responsibilities that include the administration of the Endangered Species Act, and it really should come as no surprise that senior political appointees are involved in significant decisions; in many cases it is required by law and regulation," Paolino said.

A decision on the critical habitat for another Utah species, the Southwestern willow flycatcher, which is classified as endangered, was influenced by McDonald as well, the GAO found, but the ultimate decision was supportable by scientific evidence. The White-tailed prairie dog was third Utah-based species identified in the report.

Lyle Laverty, who was recently confirmed as Interior's assistant secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, acknowledged there were problems before in the agency, but that it's now improved.

"I believe the department and the service have made great strides over this past year in ensuring that our [endangered species] decision-making processes are clearly delineated and that we maintain a strong emphasis on ethical conduct," Laverty said.

Still, Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., blasted the executive branch for taking the country back to the first Bush administration, where they were "trying to solve difficult environmental problems with political science. It defies the law; it defies common sense."

Two Republicans on the committee turned the hearing into an airing of contempt for the impacts of the Endangered Species Act on humans, and they also railed against those who believe mankind is behind climate change.

One of them, Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, raised the widely circulated Internet claim that spotted owls were found to be nesting in the crest of the K on K-Mart signs. "Maybe as an endangered species we should consider K-Mart signs," he jested.