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Speakout: Species Act interference clearly documented

By Noah Greenwald

A few weeks ago, the media uncovered illegal reversals of endangered species decisions. These reversals were ordered by Julie MacDonald, a political appointee in the Department of Interior. What's more surprising is that the Rocky Mountain News has twice printed MacDonald's claims that "there was no proof she ordered researchers to change findings" ("Groups sue over plover protection," Nov. 21), and MacDonald's challenge to "come up with a document that shows she did" ("Research cited in species decision," Nov. 1). It's one thing for MacDonald to make this claim, but for the News to fail to mention that the documents are already public and irrefutable is quite another.

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act include an e-mail from the Washington office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that reads, "Here is the revised \[white-tailed prairie dog Federal Register] notice, with the finding changed from substantial to not substantial per Julie's instructions," effectively ending consideration of Endangered Species Act protection for the species. Similarly, an e-mail concerning the Gunnison's prairie dog reads, "Per Julie please make the \[prairie dog] finding negative." In both cases, determinations already prepared by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists that species were in need of protection to avoid extinction were rubbed out by a one-line order from MacDonald.

Other documents demonstrate MacDonald or other high-level officials played a role in reversing decisions to protect the Gunnison sage grouse, California tiger salamander, roundtail chub, Mexican garter snake and a Mariana Islands plant.

This interference is not just wrong - it's illegal. Indeed, federal Judge William Alsup recently reached just this conclusion, finding that a decision by MacDonald to reduce protections for endangered California tiger salamanders was illegal because it overturned agency biologists without basis.

When Congress wrote the Endangered Species Act, it specifically required that decisions about whether to protect species must be based solely on the best available science. The ultimate survival of some of the nation's most emblematic wildlife species and the health of our ecosystems might have been sacrificed otherwise. Embattled wildlife like the sage grouse and prairie dogs are owed a fair shake. Interior must throw out MacDonald's tainted decisions so these species can have a chance at survival, but we also need to fix the bigger problems.

MacDonald's interference in scientific decisions concerning the nation's endangered wildlife is pervasive. In response to a 2005 survey conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 84 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists confirmed that they were directed to exclude or alter scientific information in their decisions and reports. Several mentioned MacDonald by name as impeding the agency's scientific integrity; for example, one specifically wrote of MacDonald: "I have never before seen the boldness of intimidation demonstrated by a single political appointee. She has modified the behavior of the entire agency. I believe there should be a thorough investigation of her abuse of discretionary authority and modification of science information provided in FWS documents."

This may finally happen. The Department of Interior's inspector general has launched an investigation of MacDonald, and Reps. Nick Rahall and Jay Inslee have also called for an inquiry. The problems, however, don't stop with MacDonald - the Bush administration has a long history of suppressing science for political purposes. Americans deserve a government that allows scientists, not politicians, to make scientific decisions.

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