

Houston Chronicle

October 29, 2006

Bush staffer, scientists often at odds over endangered list

By JULIET EILPERIN, *Washington Post*

WASHINGTON - A senior Bush political appointee at the Interior Department has rejected staff scientists' recommendations to protect imperiled animals and plants under the Endangered Species Act at least half a dozen times in the past three years, documents show.

In addition, staff complaints that their scientific findings were frequently overruled or disparaged at the behest of landowners or industry have led the agency's inspector general to look into the role of Julie MacDonald — who has been deputy assistant secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks since 2004 — in decisions on protecting endangered species.

The documents show MacDonald has repeatedly refused to go along with staff reports concluding that species such as the white-tailed prairie dog and the Gunnison's sage grouse are at risk of extinction. Career officials and scientists urged the department to identify the species as either threatened or endangered.

Overall, President Bush's appointees have added far fewer species to the protected list than did the administrations of either Bill Clinton or George H.W. Bush, according to the advocacy group Center for Biological Diversity.

As of now, the administration has listed 56 species under the Endangered Species Act, for a rate of about 10 a year. Under Clinton, officials listed 512 species, or 64 a year, and under President George H.W. Bush the department listed 234, or 59 a year.

Interior spokesman Hugh Vickery said the agency has added fewer plants and animals to the list because it has been mired in lawsuits.



Official rejects endangered species advice

WASHINGTON, Oct. 30 (UPI) -- A senior U.S. Interior Department official has rejected recommendations from staff scientists to protect endangered species at least six times in three years.

The scientists complained that Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Julie MacDonald rejected the recommendations, made under the Endangered Species Act, because of requests from landowners and corporations, The Washington Post reported Monday. Their complaints have led the department's inspector general to open an investigation into MacDonald's role in decisions regarding endangered species.

Documents revealed that MacDonald has rejected staff reports about the dangers faced by species including the white-tailed prairie dog and the Gunnison sage grouse, the Post said. Staff members had recommended the species be classified as endangered or threatened.

MacDonald told the newspaper the ultimate decision on the recommendations lies with the head of the Fish and Wildlife Service but she sees it as her job to root out vague or poorly argued reports.

DENVER POST

October 30, 2006

Interior aide bars grouse's protection

By Kim McGuire

U.S. Department of Interior officials reversed a Fish and Wildlife Service recommendation that the Gunnison sage grouse be declared an endangered species, according to documents released Monday by four Western environmental groups.

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials thought endangered-species protection should be extended to the grouse and several other species.

Among the other species considered for protection were the roundtail cub, Gunnison's prairie dog, the white-tailed prairie dog and the Mexican garter snake.

In each of those cases, Interior officials ordered the agency to reverse its findings, the documents show.

"Endangered plants and wildlife have a tough enough time without politicians manipulating the science," said Erin Roberton, a Denver-based staff biologist with the Center for Native Ecosystems.

Much of the criticism of the listing decisions was directed at Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie MacDonald, who the environmental groups say reversed several scientific findings without any biological justification.

MacDonald said in an interview she does not make decisions whether to grant federal protection to a species. That responsibility, she said, belongs to the head of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

She did say it is her job to protect "the public face of the Fish and Wildlife Service" by carefully scrutinizing listing documents.

In April, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced it would not add the Gunnison sage grouse to the endangered-species list based on the population trends and because the agency could find no significant threats to the bird.

A spokeswoman for the regional office said she could not confirm whether Denver-based wildlife managers initially recommended that the grouse be declared an endangered species.

The documents were obtained by the Center for Native Ecosystems, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sagebrush Sea Campaign and Forest Guardians.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

October 30, 2006

Protection of species criticized

Some contend Bush administration ignores science to favor industry, landowners over threatened flora, fauna

By Juliet Eilperin, WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON - A senior Bush political appointee at the Interior Department has rejected staff scientists' recommendations to protect imperiled animals and plants under the Endangered Species Act at least half a dozen times in the past three years, documents show.

In addition, staff complaints that their scientific findings were frequently overruled or disparaged at the behest of landowners or industry have led the agency's inspector general to look into the role of Julie MacDonald -- who has been deputy assistant secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks since 2004 -- in decisions on protecting endangered species.

The documents show MacDonald has repeatedly refused to go along with staff reports concluding that species such as the white-tailed prairie dog and the Gunnison's sage grouse are at risk of extinction.

Career officials and scientists urged the department to identify the species as either threatened or endangered.

Overall, President Bush's appointees have added far fewer species to the protected list than did the administrations of either Bill Clinton or George H.W. Bush, according to the advocacy group Center for Biological Diversity.

As of now, the administration has listed 56 species under the Endangered Species Act, for a rate of about 10 a year. Under Clinton, officials listed 512 species, or 64 a year, and under President George H.W. Bush the department listed 234, or 59 a year.

The dispute is the latest in a series of controversies in which government officials and outside scientists have accused the Bush administration of overriding or setting aside scientific findings that clashed with its political agenda on such issues as climate change, the Plan B emergency contraceptive or stem cell research.

Interior spokesman Hugh Vickery said the agency has added fewer plants and animals to the list because it has been mired in lawsuits over existing listings and was more focused on ensuring their recovery than in identifying new ones.

MacDonald said in an interview that she does not make the decision on whether to federally protect a species, because the head of the Fish and Wildlife Service has that responsibility.

But MacDonald said she had made her feelings clear in an array of documents, overruled scientists' conclusions in areas where she has authority, such as designating critical habitat, and mocked rank-and-file employees' recommendations.

MacDonald said she sees her job as protecting "the public face of the Fish and Wildlife Service" by carefully scrutinizing listing documents that often seemed vague or unsupported by evidence.

"A lot of times when I first read a document I think, 'This is a joke, this is just not right.' So I'll ask questions," said MacDonald, a civil engineer by training who worked at the California Resources Agency before joining the Interior Department in 2002.

"These documents have tremendous economic and social implications for people."

Since the act's inception in 1973, the government has identified 1,337 domestic species as threatened or endangered, of which 1,311 remain on the list.

At any given time the government is evaluating hundreds of candidate species: Officials and scientists review all the available scientific literature on a plant or animal before awarding it protection.

The process can take several years, even though under law it should take no more than two years, three months.

In a few instances, federal judges have overturned decisions MacDonald had influenced.

After she declared that the endangered Santa Barbara and Sonoma salamanders were no longer "distinct populations" entitled to protection, William Alsup, a judge on the U.S. District Court for Northern California, ruled MacDonald had arbitrarily instructed Fish and Wildlife scientists to downgrade the two species even though an agency scientist concluded "genetics state otherwise."

"This is not to suggest that the Secretary of Interior has no role in the ultimate decision," Alsup wrote. "If the Secretary wants to re-assess the evidence, he may choose to do so, but, in doing so, he must set forth a discernible rationale."

In several instances, MacDonald wrote sarcastic comments in the margins of the documents, questioning why scientists were portraying a species' condition as so bleak.

When scientists raised the possibility that a proposed road might degrade the greater sage grouse's habitat, which is scattered through 11 Western states, MacDonald wrote: "Has nothing to do with sage grouse. This belongs to a treatise on 'Why roads are bad'?"

MacDonald acknowledged her comments appeared harsh at times.

"Mea culpa," she said of the roads comment. "I read so many of these I get frustrated sometimes. I shouldn't be flippant. I shouldn't be sarcastic."

MacDonald has repeatedly urged employees to consider the position of industry officials more seriously when weighing whether to declare a species threatened or endangered.



October 30, 2006

A clash in the Interior over endangered listings

By Juliet Eilperin, THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON — A senior Bush political appointee at the Interior Department has rejected staff scientists' recommendations to protect animals and plants under the Endangered Species Act at least half a dozen times in the past three years, documents show.

In addition, staff complaints that their scientific findings were frequently overruled or disparaged at the behest of landowners or industry have led the agency's inspector general to look into the role of Julie MacDonald — who has been deputy assistant secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks since 2004 — in decisions on protecting endangered species.

The documents show MacDonald has repeatedly refused to go along with staff reports concluding that species such as the white-tailed prairie dog and the Gunnison's sage grouse are at risk of extinction. Career officials and scientists urged the department to identify the species as either threatened or endangered.

Overall, President Bush's appointees have added far fewer species to the protected list than did the administrations of either Bill Clinton or George H.W. Bush, according to the advocacy group Center for Biological Diversity. As of now, the administration has listed 56 species under the Endangered Species Act, for a rate of about 10 a year. Under Clinton, officials listed 512 species, or 64 a year, and under President George H.W. Bush the department listed 234, or 59 a year.

The dispute is the latest in a series of controversies in which government officials and outside scientists have accused the Bush administration of overriding or setting aside scientific findings that clashed with its political agenda on such issues as climate change, the Plan B emergency contraceptive or stem-cell research.

Interior spokesman Hugh Vickery said the agency has added fewer plants and animals to the list because it has been mired in lawsuits over existing listings and was more focused on ensuring their recovery than in identifying new ones.

MacDonald said that she does not make the decision on whether to protect a species, because the head of the Fish and Wildlife Service has that responsibility. But MacDonald said she had made her feelings clear in documents; overruled scientists' conclusions in areas where she has authority, such as designating critical habitat; and mocked rank-and-file employees' recommendations.

MacDonald said she sees her job as protecting "the public face of the Fish and Wildlife Service" by carefully scrutinizing listing documents that often seemed vague or unsupported by evidence.

"A lot of times when I first read a document I think, 'This is a joke, this is just not right.' So I'll ask questions," said MacDonald, a civil engineer by training.

Since the act's inception in 1973, the government has identified 1,337 domestic species as threatened or endangered, of which 1,311 remain on the list. At any given time the government is evaluating hundreds of

candidate species; officials and scientists review all the available scientific literature on a plant or animal before awarding it protection.

Hundreds of pages of records, obtained by environmental groups through the Freedom of Information Act, chronicle the long-running battle between MacDonald and Fish and Wildlife Service employees over decisions on whether to safeguard plants and animals from oil and gas drilling, power lines and real-estate development — spiced by her mocking comments on their work and their frequently expressed resentment.

Two advocacy groups, the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Center for Biological Diversity, provided the documents to The Washington Post. Francesca Grifo, who directs the union's scientific integrity program, said MacDonald's actions are "not business as usual, but a systemic problem of tampering with science that is putting our environment at risk."

In a few instances, federal judges have overturned decisions MacDonald had influenced. After she declared that the endangered Santa Barbara and Sonoma salamanders were no longer "distinct populations" entitled to protection, William Alsup, a judge on the U.S. District Court for Northern California, ruled MacDonald had arbitrarily instructed Fish and Wildlife scientists to downgrade the two species even though an agency scientist concluded "genetics state otherwise."

MacDonald has repeatedly urged employees to consider the position of industry officials more seriously when weighing whether to declare a species threatened or endangered. During a discussion of greater-sage-grouse populations, she wrote, "This paragraph completely ignores the comments received by the Owyhee Cattlemen's Association and the Idaho Cattle Association." The organization opposed the listing on the grounds that it would limit their use of land.

During a separate rulemaking concerning the threatened bull trout's habitat on the Klamath River, Fish and Wildlife officials debated via e-mail how to respond to MacDonald. Her questions, they believed, reflected the concerns of Ronald Yockim, a lawyer representing three Idaho counties opposing a pending decision to protect nearly 300 miles of the river. After MacDonald's intervention, Fish and Wildlife officials opted to protect just 42 miles.

October 30, 2006

Greenwire

ENDANGERED SPECIES: Bush appointee rejected ESA recommendations 6 times, documents show

An Interior Department political appointee has rejected scientists' recommendations on federal protection for imperiled animals at least six times in the past three years, according to documents from the Union of Concerned Scientists and Center for Biological Diversity.

The documents, provided to the *Washington Post*, illustrated a history of overruling scientific findings by Interior scientists. Interior's Office of the Inspector General has begun an investigation. They showed that in addition to refusing to go along with staff scientists' recommendations on listings under the Endangered Species Act, Interior Deputy Secretary Julie MacDonald frequently overruled scientific findings on behalf of impacted landowners or industry.

In two instances, MacDonald refused to concur with staff reports that the Gunnison sage grouse and the white-tailed prairie dog are at risk of extinction. MacDonald's actions prompted several staff complaints that led Interior's OIG to investigate.

MacDonald said she scrutinizes reports to protect "the public face of the Fish and Wildlife Service." "A lot of times when I first read a document I think, 'This is a joke, this is just not right.' So I'll ask questions," said MacDonald, who worked at the California Resources Agency before joining Interior in 2002. "These documents have tremendous economic and social implications for people." Francesca Grifo, who directs the UCS's scientific integrity program, said MacDonald's actions are "not business as usual but a systemic problem of tampering with science that is putting our environment at risk."

Interior officials contacted Rep. Rahall about oversight hearings

Interior officials have privately contacted the ranking member on the House Resources Committee, Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.), who plans to hold oversight hearings if Democrats retake the majority in next month's midterm elections (Juliet Eilperin, *Washington Post*, Oct. 30).



October 31, 2006

Wildlife groups decry 'political' move

By Deborah Frazier

A Bush administration appointee ignored scientific research when she took four Colorado wildlife species out of the running for endangered species protection, conservation groups charged Monday.

"The Endangered Species Act states that listings are made based on science," said Erin Robertson of the Denver-based Center on Native Ecosystems. "It is illegal to allow politics to change the decisions."

Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Julie MacDonald has pulled the Gunnison's prairie dog, the Gunnison sage grouse, the white-tailed prairie dog and the roundtail chub from the years-long process that selects candidates for an ESA listing.

Colorado is home to all four of those species.

MacDonald is under fire for her response to recommendations to protect eight species of animals and plants over a three-year period.

Four other species found in other states - the California tiger salamander, bull trout, a Mariana Islands plant and the Mexican garter snake - also were dropped.

MacDonald and other officials from the Interior Department were unavailable for comment Monday.

Under the Endangered Species Act, an animal or plant is nominated and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists perform a 90-day review of threats to the species' survival.

If the scientists find serious threats, the species' habitat and population are studied in depth for 12 months.

The act requires that if the research finds a significant risk, the species be considered for endangered species listing, which provides legal protections that can inhibit land development and incur other costs that have made species protection politically unpopular.

"There was no question among scientists that these species are imperiled and require protection," said Nicole Rosmarino of the New Mexico-based Forest Guardians.

"It was shocking how clear the political manipulation was," she said.

The conservation groups obtained background on the decision in documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

The scientific reports were not only ignored but ridiculed in MacDonald's notes and e-mails, said Rosmarino.

In the case of the Gunnison sage grouse, which had reached the 12-month study period, MacDonald wrote on a report about the impact of roads on the habitat:

"Has nothing to do with sage grouse. This belongs in a treatise on 'Why roads are bad.' "

Colorado's extensive oil and gas development, including roads, are threats to both the white-tailed prairie dog and the Gunnison sage grouse, said Robertson.

"The Endangered Species Act is supposed to be a biological decision, but this political appointee has been systematically reversing scientific findings," she said.

MacDonald, a civil engineer, worked for the California Resources Department before she was appointed to the federal position in 2002.

"This is an administration which has a culture of suppressing science for politics," said Robertson. "If it stands in the administration's way, they don't want to know about the science."

The administration has ignored its own scientific findings on climate change and water rights in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, she said.

In September, a federal court judge reversed the Interior Department's decision to limit water flows through the park, calling the decision nonsensical and illegal.

Endangered Species Act protection

Four Colorado species dropped from the process that creates candidates for protections:

- **GUNNISON SAGE GROUSE:** Lives in southwest Colorado, southeast Utah. Historically also inhabited New Mexico and Arizona. An estimated 4,000 breeding adults remain, mostly in Gunnison River Valley. Numbers declined because of development and lack of breeding adults.
 - **ROUNDTAIL CHUB:** Lives in Colorado River in Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, California and other states. Population shrinking because of introduction of non-native fish, water pollution and habitat degradation.
 - **GUNNISON'S PRAIRIE DOG:** Habitat includes Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Population dropped 97 percent in the past century because of shooting, poisoning, energy development, disease.
 - **WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG:** Lives in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Utah. Vanished from 90 percent of native habitat because of shooting, poisoning, energy development and plague.
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The Salt Lake Tribune

November 1, 2006

Activists say rulings imperil species

By Joe Baird

An Interior Department official has come under fire from environmental groups for disregarding a series of recommendations from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect as many as eight threatened animal, fish and plant species - including several in Utah - under the Endangered Species Act.

Julie MacDonald, a deputy assistant secretary, has rejected the findings of Fish and Wildlife biologists and reversed or altered agency findings on the Gunnison sage-grouse, the white-tailed prairie dog and Gunnison's prairie dog, among others, according to documents obtained by conservation groups under the Freedom of Information Act.

Gunnison's prairie dog is found on the Colorado Plateau in southern Utah, the white-tailed prairie dog ranges across the eastern part of the state and the Gunnison sage grouse is found in southeastern Utah.

"It takes years and lawsuits just to force the Fish and Wildlife Service to make these decisions. Then [MacDonald] comes along and changes them," said Erin Robertson of the Denver-based Center for Native Ecosystems. "Now we have a whole series of tainted decisions. Interior needs to throw them out so the agency can do the reviews they already determined they needed to do."

Other impacted species include the California tiger salamander, the bull trout, the roundtail chub, the Mexican garter snake and a Marianas Island plant.

In a story first reported by the Washington Post, the documents reveal e-mails and memos in which MacDonald, who joined Interior in 2002 and has a civil engineering background, overruled the recommendations of Fish and Wildlife Services staff.

One set of e-mails from January of this year, obtained by the Santa Fe, N.M.-based Forest Guardians, shows Gunnison's prairie dog apparently headed for listing under the Endangered Species Act. But under orders from MacDonald, the positive finding was changed to a negative finding.

"There was consensus [from FWS] that the species was imperiled. It's the only species of prairie dog where its entire range is vulnerable," said Forest Guardians' Nicole Rosmarino.

MacDonald also reversed a positive finding for the Gunnison sage grouse and rejected a conservation assessment from the Fish and Wildlife Services' Salt Lake City office for a positive finding of the white-tailed prairie dog, based on threats to the species from disease and oil and gas development.

MacDonald told the Post that the recommendations she rejects or changes are often vague and lack the evidence to support their conclusions.

"A lot of times when I first read a document I think, 'This is a joke, this is just not right.' So I'll ask questions," she said. "These documents have tremendous economic and social implications for people."

But critics say MacDonald's meddling in biological and habitat assessments is an example of the Bush administration's penchant for allowing special interests to guide its environmental policies.

On the ground, meanwhile, local wildlife managers say they are proceeding with their conservation efforts.

"It really doesn't change anything for us," said Sarah Lupis, a conservation program specialist with Utah State University's extension services who works on both sage grouse and prairie dog issues.

"Many of the groups we work with were formed when the [Endangered Species Act] petitions went out, and they have continued to operate after the decision not to list was made.

"Most of the participants in our groups understand there will likely be challenges to these decisions or new petitions. So they know they need to keep developing plans."



November 1, 2006

Research cited in species decision

By Deborah Frazier

Scientific research didn't justify keeping four Colorado wildlife species in the running for endangered species protection, a Bush administration appointee said Tuesday.

"I check scientific citations for the conclusions. I ask questions about statements," said Julie MacDonald, deputy assistant secretary of the Interior. "I'm not saying the science was bad. It's a work in progress, but I'm the second pair of eyes and I care that these documents be right."

MacDonald's review resulted in the Gunnison's prairie dog, the Gunnison sage grouse, the white-tailed prairie dog and the roundtail chub being dropped from the years-long process that selects candidates for an Endangered Species Act listing.

All four species are found in Colorado, but development has diminished their habitat.

Four conservation groups, including the Denver-based Center on Native Ecosystems, said that MacDonald's comments on the species were based on politics, not science.

MacDonald said she reviewed research reports from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the conservation groups that petitioned for the ESA listing.

"I read through them to make sure they make sense," said MacDonald, a civil engineer appointed to the position four years ago.

She said that sometimes the answers to her questions don't change the status of the species reviews, but sometimes her inquiries have led staff biologists to decide that the species wasn't significantly imperiled.

"I'm not saying the science is bad, but they look at a lot of stuff," MacDonald said.

In one case involving a species in another state, the report mischaracterized the study's conclusions, she said.

"They just didn't read it right," she said. "Who knows why? I have no way of knowing why."

MacDonald said there is no proof that she ordered researchers to change their findings and challenged the conservationists to come up with a document that shows she did.

Scientists from the regional office of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Lakewood who helped research the species weren't available for comment.

Diane Katzenberger, spokeswoman for the office, said the groups that advocated ESA listing for the four Colorado species didn't provide enough data.

The information on the Gunnison sage grouse was reviewed by an Idaho researcher who concluded ESA listing wasn't warranted, she said.

Clait Braun, who retired from the Colorado Division of Wildlife and studied the Gunnison sage grouse, said that the Idaho researcher received only information on the population near Gunnison, which is the largest group.

"All the data indicates it should be listed," said Braun, who said the Idaho researcher didn't have access to information about the Gunnison sage grouse disappearing from other areas in Colorado.



November 3, 2006

More debasing assaults on environment, wildlife

By PAT MURPHY

Science and its contributions to humankind's advance toward improved quality of life have always encountered naysayers whose obstructionism is born of fear of the future, mythology, religious mysticism or common old self-interest.

Even today, believers that the world is flat and that NASA faked the moon landings can be found clinging stubbornly to their certitude, despite irrefutable evidence to the contrary.

Nowhere has hostility and contempt for science been more prevalent and heavy-handed in recent years than among political appointees of President Bush, who've rejected stem cell research on religious grounds, global warming as a myth, protection of woodlands as effete tree-hugging, and industrial air cleanup as too expensive.

Another example of science trashing is in the news, this time by a senior Bush appointee whose title, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, apparently has intoxicated her with self-important judgment.

Julie McDonald's mocking rejection of advice from agency scientists has led Interior's inspector general to launch an investigation of her decisions.

McDonald acted like a mole inside Interior, carrying out the wishes of industry and landowners, some of which were leaked Interior staff memos for their advice before she rejected scientific advice.

This has occurred six times in the past three years, according to Interior documents obtained by environmental groups through the Freedom of Information Act. She refused, for example, to list the white-tailed prairie dog and Gunnison sage grouse as at risk of extinction.

McDonald sneered at scientists. When experts suggested a proposed road would degrade grouse habitat, McDonald insultingly fired back, "Has nothing to do with sage grouse. This belongs in a treatise on 'Why roads are bad'?" Some scientific advice she called "a joke."

It hasn't been all a free ride for McDonald. Judge William Alsup, in the U.S. District Court of Northern California, overturned her decision to delist the Santa Barbara and Sonoma salamanders. As the contempt for wildlife and environment pervades policy, a new World Wildlife Fund study reports darkly that human demand on natural resources is 25 percent greater than the Earth's ability to provide everything from food to energy.

Americans need to do more than hope that the rubble and death being created in Iraq is not a microcosm of the bleak legacy that Bush's stewards of the environment and wildlife will bequeath to Americans. They need to elect people who will represent the interests of ordinary people and their families, people who believe in protecting the country for generations yet to come.

NewScientist.com

04 November 2006

White House again accused of distorting science

The Bush administration again finds itself accused of distorting science for political ends. Documents released this week show that a high-ranking political appointee within the US Department of the Interior watered down biologists' reports that called for certain rare species to be given federal protection.

Biologists at the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) prepared a report arguing that Gunnison sage grouse be listed under the Endangered Species Act, but Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie MacDonald - an engineer by training - edited out much of the scientific evidence supporting the recommendation. The FWS then decided not to list the grouse, in part because of a lack of evidence.

Email records also show that MacDonald instructed FWS biologists to recommend against listing the Gunnison prairie dog. A draft report stating that it faced serious threat from sylvatic plague was then altered to read that there was not sufficient evidence of that threat - though no information was offered to justify this change. The documents were obtained via Freedom of Information Act requests by conservation groups. The Interior Department says MacDonald was simply pointing out where biologists' evidence was weak. However, Francesca Grifo, director of the scientific integrity programme at the advocacy group Union of Concerned Scientists says her actions are part of a culture of suppressing inconvenient scientific results.

Rocky Mountain News

Letter to the Editor:

End the role of politics in species decisions

New Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne should immediately withdraw the decisions on species where political interference in science has occurred and allow a new scientific review to take place ("Wildlife groups decry 'political' move," Oct. 31).

Furthermore, to address the larger systemic pattern of interference with science at the Fish and Wildlife Service, Kempthorne should:

- Create explicit policies that reinforce a culture of scientific openness, allow FWS biologists to do their jobs, and punish political appointees and others at the agency who interfere with science.

- Ensure that Endangered Species Act decisions are based on the best available science and improve the transparency of and public disclosure of the Endangered Species Act determination process.
- Make adequate resources available to FWS to allow appropriate, science-based Endangered Species Act decisions.

Glenn G. Whiteside
Monument

Salt Lake Tribune

Letter to the Editor:

Policy-distorting bureaucrats

In its six years of operation, the Bush administration has established a clear practice in matters where good science exists to guide policy. It is this: Deny or discredit scientific findings and then defer to the interests of whichever industry stands to benefit from ignoring science. For example, this has been the administration's consistent stance on climate change.

Now there are reports of a similar tack taken by a political appointee at the Interior Department whose job it is to enforce the Endangered Species Act. Julie MacDonald, a deputy assistant secretary, has consistently ignored and belittled the recommendations of biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Dirk Kempthorne's recent appointment as secretary of the Interior offers the administration a new start at basing ESA decisions on the best available science. Effective policy will require that the ESA determination process become public and transparent and that FWS employees are given adequate resources to implement species listings.

Effective implementation will not be possible, however, until policy-distorting bureaucrats like MacDonald are removed from their posts.

John Mull
Morgan

November 13, 2006

High Country News

Two Weeks in the West

Interior's Fuzzy Science

If it were up to many U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, the Endangered Species Act would now protect the Gunnison's prairie dog, the Gunnison sage grouse, the white-tailed prairie dog and a host of other critters. But none of those species made the list, thanks in part to Department of Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie MacDonald, who tinkered with or ignored agency biologists' findings. Documents obtained in October by conservation groups reveal MacDonald's interference with her own scientific advisers. MacDonald, a Bush appointee whose background is in engineering, not biology, "edited" her scientists' reports, adding or deleting phrases to reverse the meaning of their recommendations. In a document recommending protection of the Gunnison sage grouse, she injected doubt regarding the grouse's designation as a species, despite almost universal agreement in the scientific community that it is a distinct species.