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Interior Official Quits Ahead of Hearing

By Matthew Daly (AP)

WASHINGTON -- An Interior Department official accused of pressuring government scientists to make their research fit her policy goals has resigned.

Julie MacDonald, deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, submitted her resignation letter to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, a department spokesman said Tuesday.

MacDonald resigned a week before a House congressional oversight committee was to hold a hearing on accusations that she violated the Endangered Species Act, censored science and mistreated staff of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

MacDonald was recently rebuked by the department's inspector general, who told Congress in a report last month that she broke federal rules and should face punishment for leaking information about endangered species to private groups.

Interior Department spokesman Hugh Vickery confirmed MacDonald's resignation but declined to comment further.

Environmentalists cheered the departure of MacDonald, who they say tried to bully government scientists into altering their findings, often without scientific basis.

"Julie MacDonald's reign of terror over the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is finally over," said Kieran Suckling, policy director of the Center for Biological Diversity. "Endangered species and scientists everywhere are breathing a sigh of relief."

MacDonald, a civil engineer with no formal training in natural sciences, had served in her post since 2004. She was a senior adviser in the department for two years before that.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said MacDonald had "betrayed the mission she swore to uphold," adding that her actions "undermined both the work and the integrity of the Fish and Wildlife Service and its many dedicated employees."

Wyden placed a hold Monday on President Bush's nomination of Lyle Lavery to be assistant Interior secretary for fish, wildlife and parks until allegations against MacDonald were resolved.

The inspector general's report said MacDonald tried to remove protections for a rare jumping mouse in the Rocky Mountains based on a questionable study, and reduced by 80 percent the amount of streams to be protected to help bull trout recover in the Pacific Northwest.

MacDonald also pressured the Fish and Wildlife Service to alter findings on the Kootenai River sturgeon in Idaho and Montana so dam operations would not be harmed, the report said.