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Lawsuit targets Interior official

By Jeremy P. Meyer

In the middle of the debate over the future of the Gunnison Sage-grouse is Deputy Assistant Interior Secretary Julie MacDonald.

MacDonald oversees the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's operations, including Endangered Species Act reviews.

A lawsuit by nine environmental groups and San Miguel County contends the Bush administration - through MacDonald - made a political, not scientific, decision to keep the Gunnison grouse off the endangered-species list.

"MacDonald reached out and interfered with the biologically based decisions by staff in Colorado," said Amy Atwood, attorney for the Western Environmental Law Center.

MacDonald appears to have been involved in the process based on some of the 500 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service documents obtained by the environmental group Sagebrush Sea Campaign.

A July 2005 e-mail shows that after a call from a governor's office, MacDonald made inquiries about the grouse.

In December 2005, handwritten notes by an FWS Colorado supervisor indicated that it was decided Washington would handle the first draft of the findings.

An April 2006 e-mail states that "JM" asked for an electronic copy of the decision to "do some editing."

Environmental groups say their opposition to MacDonald has been bolstered by an investigation by the Department of Interior's Inspector General.

The report says MacDonald often sought to reshape the agency's scientific reports to ease the impact of agency decisions on private landowners.

The report found instances of MacDonald's intervening in discussions about the California tiger salamander, the bull trout and the Preble's Meadow jumping mouse. It did not mention the Gunnison Sage-grouse.

MacDonald is on leave and couldn't be reached for comment.

"The fact that Julie MacDonald can review a document and can send questions back down is not necessarily a bad thing. That's part of the oversight role," said Hugh Vickery, spokesman for the Department of Interior.

MacDonald had no role in the Gunnison Sage-grouse decision, Vickery said.