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## Interior Official and Federal Biologists Clash on Danger to Bird

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**L**A JOLLA, Calif., Dec. 4 - The scientific opinions of a Bush administration appointee at the Interior Department with no background in wildlife biology were provided as part of the source material for the panel of Fish and Wildlife Service biologists and managers who recommended against giving the greater sage grouse protection under the endangered species act.

The appointee, Julie MacDonald, a senior policymaker, criticized studies showing widespread loss of grouse territory and sporadic declines in grouse populations.

Recommendations by the department's panels of experts are usually followed. Steve Williams, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, must make a final decision by Dec. 29.

The sage grouse, whose habitat overlaps areas of likely oil and gas deposits across states like Wyoming and Montana, would likely become an economic headache to the energy and cattle industries if it were listed. A listing can trigger extensive regulation and increase costs and delays.

Mr. Williams, who is attending a Western governors' conference on the Endangered Species Act in San Diego, said on Friday that the scientists and bureau personnel who made the recommendation not to protect the greater sage grouse were given two extensive internal reviews of the state of scientific knowledge on the grouse and its sagebrush territory.

One was done by federal biologists. Another version was provided by Ms. MacDonald, deputy assistant interior secretary and their political overseer, who peppered the biologists' draft with barbed commentary and made wholesale changes. "What was provided to the panel," Mr. Williams said, "was both the unedited version and the version with comment."

Ms. MacDonald's critique of sage grouse biology and the biologists who work for an agency she oversees showed flashes of her strong property-rights background and her deference to industry views.

Among other comments, Ms. MacDonald called science saying the birds had numbered in the millions before settlers arrived in the 19th century "simply a fairy tale, constructed out of whole cloth." She also questioned whether the grouse was dependent on sagebrush during the winter, saying "they will eat other stuff if it is available."

Mr. Williams and two specialists on grouse said that its seasonal dependence on sagebrush was uncontested among biologists.

Ralph Morgenweck, the head of the service's Denver regional office, which supervised the scientific field work and analysis by bureau biologists, said in an interview Friday that challenges from nonbiologists were "very common" and beneficial to scientists.

Williams, the service director, emphasized that the decision-making involving the grouse has been open and that the biologists' own review of the science was forwarded to the panels involved in the decision along with Ms. MacDonald's critique. And, he said, "the important thing in my mind is that we haven't tried to hide any information."

He added that after the final decision on the grouse's status was published in the Federal Register, the underlying record, including the dueling reviews of the available science, would be available in the service's Denver office.

A partial copy - 48 of about 80 pages - of Ms. MacDonald's editing and commentary on the biologists' mid-October draft review of the science was provided to The New York Times by an environmental group, the Sagebrush Sea Project, which has sought protection for the bird; it matched a copy that Mr. Williams said he had sent to the panel responsible for making recommendations.

The issue of political overseers modifying information from federal scientists that conflicts with policy goals has arisen periodically in recent years, most notably in the area of climate change. It has not been as visible in biology, an arena important to conservation groups, extractive industries and others concerned with the Endangered Species Act.

The consistent thrust of Ms. MacDonald's critique was to dismiss the methodology behind studies that

## **Opposing Views of Sage Grouse Danger**

The panel that made the recommendation that the greater sage grouse was in no immediate danger of extinction was provided with two competing reviews of the available science. One was the work of career biologists at the Fish and Wildlife Service. The second was a caustic critique of this work by Julie MacDonald, the deputy assistant secretary of the interior. Here are comparisons of the two documents.

On the former range of the bird, the biologists wrote: "Prior to the settlement of the Western United States by European immigrants in the 19th century, sage grouse lived in 13 states and 3 Canadian provinces. Sagebrush habitats that potentially supported sage grouse occupied approximately 463,509 square miles."

Ms. McDonald wrote in rebuttal: "This entire discussion of estimated habitat, estimated range, estimated population should be eliminated as it is 1) not supported by contemporary accounts, 2) not supported by data and 3) simply a fairy tale, constructed out of whole cloth, based on a series of arbitrary assumptions."

On whether sage grouse need sagebrush to survive during the winter, the career biologists wrote: "Sage grouse depend entirely on sagebrush throughout the winter for both food and cover." Ms. MacDonald wrote: "I believe that is an overstatement, as they will eat other stuff if it's available."

indicated significant declines in grouse population or habitat, to denigrate many studies as mere "opinion" and to seek inclusion of industry comments that she found compelling.

She eliminated, in her editing, more than half of the references to the most recent "conservation assessment," a 610-page compilation and partial analysis of all available data on sage grouse populations, territory, historical trends and adaptability by a group of experts written for the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

"We should treat it as we would treat an industry publication," she wrote. Ms. MacDonald also recommended deleting extensive sections on the loss of sagebrush habitats to agriculture. And after the biologist-authors from Fish and Wildlife summarized studies showing population decline, Ms. MacDonald inserted a passage beginning "all of these data are badly flawed in some manner."

She also objected to a reference to a study that found a population of 4,000 birds in one Utah valley dwindled to less than 200 after their habitat was fragmented. "Citing examples like this, which are extreme, do not elucidate the issues we are faced with," the editor wrote. "This example should be deleted."

Terry Rabot, an assistant regional director with the Fish and Wildlife Service who served on the panel making the recommendation, said in an interview on Saturday, "About the comments Julie made - some were good, but they didn't change the outcome."

Ms. MacDonald's immediate superior, Craig Manson, the assistant secretary with oversight over the Fish and Wildlife Service, defended her approach. She is, Mr. Manson said, "highly qualified, an engineer, extremely competent, and reads every single paper cited" by federal biologists in their reviews. "When she reads a characterization of a document, she knows if you're citing it accurately."

At least one of Ms. MacDonald's pointed objections to the text was vouched for by the scientist whose work was, Ms. MacDonald said, "mischaracterized" in the biologists' synthesis: Elizabeth Crone, an author of a study analyzing statistically what seems to affect grouse populations. Ms. Crone, an assistant professor of qualitative ecology at the University of Montana, agreed with Ms. MacDonald's objections. "I would be comfortable with the editor's comments," she said.

Other biologists, however, were more surprised at Ms. MacDonald's interpretation of their work. Mike Schroeder of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife said that she had misinterpreted his 1999 study when she said it showed that grouse could survive without sagebrush.

"Sage grouse clearly depend on sagebrush to survive on a year-round basis," Mr. Schroeder said.

On the issue of population counts, he said there were flaws in the data, but "we're in a far better position of knowledge with the sage grouse than the vast majority of species in North America."