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Endangered Species

by Paul Peters

Editing science in D.C.

Science appears to have taken a back seat to ideology in recent decisions by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) concerning endangered and threatened species in Montana.

On Oct. 30, the Washington Post reported that Julie MacDonald, deputy assistant secretary of the interior for FWS, rejected the recommendations of staff scientists on protecting plants and animals under the Endangered Species Act.

Records obtained by environmental groups through Freedom of Information Act requests appear to show MacDonald altering scientists' findings to the benefit of industry interests.

Although the Post story doesn't mention Montana as a place where MacDonald had an impact on endangered species decisions, Noah Greenwald of the Arizona-based [Center for Biological Diversity](#), an environmental group that obtained some of the MacDonald documents, says she did manage to affect Montana's threatened [bull trout](#), and a small population of [white-tailed prairie dogs](#) south of Billings.

In a summary of their findings, FWS scientists recommended further study on how oil and gas development affected the white-tailed prairie dog.

Further study could have led to an endangered species listing.

But MacDonald altered the summary, removing references to the oil and gas industry and saying that threats to the species were only speculative. FWS never listed the species.

Arlene Montgomery, director of Swan Lake-based environmental group Friends of the Wild Swan, which was party to the lawsuit that eventually got bull trout listed as threatened, says records indicate MacDonald limited designation of critical habitat for bull trout to areas the fish already occupied. FWS scientists, Montgomery says, recommended that the Clark Fork River and other waterways currently uninhabited by bull trout be listed as critical habitat to help the bull trout in their migrations.

The final FWS decision, Montgomery says, "didn't rely on science."

MacDonald is currently on vacation.

Hugh Vickery, a spokesman for FWS, says part of MacDonald's job was to review regulatory documents produced by FWS scientists.

"She's a pretty tough editor," Vickery says. "She was effectively doing what a good editor does at a newspaper."

U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall II, D-W. Va., hopes to hold hearings on MacDonald's decisions, depending election outcomes.