

Interior official accused of bullying scientists resigns

MacDonald had big influence in NW

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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 recently was rebuked by the department's inspector general, who told Congress in a report in March 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.

Environmentalists cheered her departure. They say she tried to bully government scientists into altering their findings, often without scientific basis.

"As the inspector general showed, she bullied agency scientists, and she improperly released documents to industry attorneys and lobbyists, and so there's no question it's a good day for endangered species and for Fish and Wildlife Service biologists," said Noah Greenwald, Pacific Northwest representative of the Center for Biological Diversity.

"I woke up this morning, and I thought I heard the birds and wildlife cheering," Seattle-based Earthjustice attorney Kristen Boyles said. "Now I know why."

MacDonald had an influence in the Northwest. She played a strong role in reducing the amount of area protected for the bull trout, according to internal Interior Department e-mails environmentalists obtained, Greenwald said.

She also was part of an unusual multiagency "Washington Oversight Committee" of Bush administration political appointees who refused to accept a Northwest-based team of state and federal officials, environmentalists and timber-industry scientists on how to rescue the spotted owl, the Seattle P-I reported last week.

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."

Monday, Wyden blocked 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.

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.