

Government reviewing ex-official's endangered species decisions

WASHINGTON- Decisions to reduce federal protection for a Rocky Mountain jumping mouse, a Western bird known as the "mosquito king" and other threatened creatures will be reconsidered after alleged improper meddling by a senior Interior Department official.

H. Dale Hall, the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on Friday ordered the review of eight endangered species decisions in which former deputy assistant secretary Julie MacDonald was involved.

MacDonald's resignation from the post overseeing Fish and Wildlife and the National Park Service was announced in May after the department's inspector general rebuked her for pressuring scientists to alter their findings about endangered species and leaking information about them to industry officials.

Among the eight decisions, two involve the Preble's meadow jumping mouse. One was a 2005 proposal to remove the 9-inch mouse, named for its ability to leap twice its length and pivot in air, from the government's endangered species list. The second was a 2003 decision about the amount of acreage that should be protected to help the mouse recover.

Other species covered by Hall's order are the Southwestern willow flycatcher, white-tailed prairie dog, arroyo toad, California red-legged frog, Canada lynx and 12 species of Hawaiian picture-wing flies.

"We want to make sure that the science is true," Hall told reporters in a teleconference Friday.

He said he ordered the reviews based on the recommendations of his regional directors, whom he had asked to study MacDonald's decisions.

"It's a blemish, I believe, on the scientific integrity of the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of the Interior, so we're going to place a pretty high priority on trying to get those done," he said. "We wouldn't be doing them if we didn't at least suspect that the decision will be different. But I don't want to predetermine outcome."

The agency will also review designation critical habitat for lynx. Last year, the Fish and Wildlife Service designated 1,841 square miles of habitat in three states, significantly less than originally proposed.

No land was included in Colorado, where more than 200 lynx roam since a restoration program started in 1999.

Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, praised the Interior Department for "stepping up to the plate to begin addressing the 'politics trumps science' ploy endemic throughout this administration." His committee held a hearing on MacDonald's actions shortly after her resignation was announced.

"What we have learned to date raises concerns about political tinkering with science that has affected perhaps 100 endangered species-related decisions - and goodness knows what else - that deserve further scrutiny," Rahall said Friday.

Hall said he had decided, based on regional directors' recommendations, against revisiting decisions affecting three other species: the Mexican garter snake found in the waters of Arizona and New Mexico; the bull trout of the Northwest; and the marbled murrelet seabird found along the Pacific Coast.

Environmentalists noted that Hall had agreed to review only about a third of the cases in which misconduct by MacDonald was alleged.

"It's a critical step for the service to take on the long road back to making decisions about endangered species based on science, not politics," said Erin Robertson, a biologist with the Denver-based Center for Native Ecosystems. "But I think this is just the tip of the iceberg."

Robertson said MacDonald may have interfered in a Fish and Wildlife decision last year not to list the Gunnison sage grouse, found only in western Colorado and on the Colorado-Utah border. It was declared a candidate in 2000.

Biologist Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity in Portland, Ore., called the list of decisions to be

reconsidered "outrageously incomplete."

"Only a full and transparent accounting of all the decisions tainted by MacDonald's malignant influence can undo the damage she has done," Greenwald said.

Francesca Grifo, director of the Union of Concerned Scientists' integrity program, said the "real culprit" was not a renegade political appointee but "a process where decisions are made behind closed doors."