

April 24, 2008

Anatomy of a Beltway Takedown

"Catalyst," the magazine of the Union of Concerned Scientists, published a story in its spring issue, "UCS Ends One Official's Corrupt Tenure." ([Scanned copy](#).) Written by Francesca Grifo, director of the Scientific Integrity Program, the article details the environmentalist group's attacks on Julie MacDonald, former assistant secretary of the Department of Interior, who disagreed with some of the career staff at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

More of the usual huffing and puffing about the politicization of science, but then Grifo reveals a little too much about how activists use reporters in their campaigns to destroy a person's career over policy disagreements.

Because this was a complex story to relate, we decided to entrust it to Juliet Eilperin, an experienced Washington Post reporter with whom we had worked extensively in the past. While she interviewed scientists and officials both inside and outside the agency, my staff and I headed to Capitol Hill to alert key members of Congress to the situation. As a result of our meetings, Congress was ready to act when Eilperin's story broke in the Post.

Representative Nick Rahall (D-WV) ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee promised oversight hearings on the misuse of science at FWS.

"We decided to entrust it." You can interpret the thought behind that phrase any number of ways: "Who do we think will take this issue seriously and give it a fair hearing?" or..."Who is sympathetic to our cause and will generate a big story we can use for our purposes?"

In either case, an effective strategy.

Eilperin wrote a page A3 story on October 30th, 2006, "[Bush Appointee Said to Reject Advice on Endangered Species](#)." It seems like a fair article, your basic charge/countercharge story, with a lead that captures the underlying policy disagreements well enough.

A senior Bush political appointee at the Interior Department has rejected staff scientists' recommendations to protect imperiled animals and plants under the Endangered Species Act at least six times in the past three years, documents show.

Which is the way the system is supposed to work. Scientists' recommendations aren't holy writ.

To her credit, Eilperin is upfront about the origins of the story.

Two advocacy groups, the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Center for Biological Diversity, provided the documents to The Washington Post. Francesca Grifo, who directs the union's scientific integrity program, said MacDonald's actions are "not business as usual but a systemic problem of tampering with science that is putting our environment at risk."

For the Union of Concerned Scientists, the piece did the trick. Activists need the imprimatur added by a major newspaper to transform policy disagreements into "scandal," generating the maelstrom of congressional hearings, breathless media coverage, outraged news releases and investigations. (BTW, note that Grifo's article fails to mention the Center for Biological Diversity. Stealing all the credit, eh?)

So MacDonald got a working over in the traditional, ugly Beltway fashion, including an investigation into her personal business. [Rep. George Miller \(D-CA\)](#) directed investigators to look into [MacDonald's farm in California](#) because it might be in territory involving a potentially endangered species.

The Interior Department's Inspector General eventually issued a report, "[Investigative Report on on Allegations against Julie MacDonald Deputy Assistant Secretary, Fish, Wildlife and Parks](#)." The key findings:

Through interviewing various sources, including FWS employees and senior officials, and reviewing pertinent documents and e-mails, we confirmed that MacDonald has been heavily involved with editing, commenting on, and reshaping the Endangered Species Program's scientific reports from the field. MacDonald admitted that her degree is in civil engineering and that she has no formal educational background in natural sciences, such as biology.

While we discovered no illegal activity on her part, we did determine that MacDonald disclosed nonpublic information to private sector sources, including the California Farm Bureau Federation and the Pacific Legal Foundation. In fact, MacDonald admitted that she has released nonpublic information to public sources on

several occasions during her tenure as Deputy Assistant Secretary for FWS.

She admitted to being a civil engineer. Shocking.

And that's it? That's enough for congressional hearings and outraged campaign of personal and professional attacks, ginned up by an environmentalist group using a sympathetic reporter?

The proper response to MacDonald's offenses: "Julie, tone it down. And try to be more careful about those documents." And we wonder how many career staff were investigated for their sending of e-mails to friends and allies on the outside.

But in Washington you destroy people's careers over policy disputes. A group's effectiveness is measured by the heads it takes. No doubt wisely, MacDonald got out before the process could reach its next abusive step -- criminal investigations -- [resigning in May 2007](#).

All in a good cause, right? Responding to the political heat, the Fish and Wildlife Department backed off on some of the Endangered Species decisions (as recounted by another big-government advocacy group, [OMB Watch](#)). And the Union of Concerned Scientists goes on its merry way, [launching yet another attack on an agency's leadership this week](#) for "politicized science."

WASHINGTON (April 23, 2008) — An investigation of the Environmental Protection Agency released today found that 889 of nearly 1,600 staff scientists reported that they experienced political interference in their work over the last five years. The study, by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), follows previous UCS investigations of the Food and Drug Administration, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and climate scientists at seven federal agencies, which also found significant administration manipulation of federal science.

"Our investigation found an agency in crisis," said Francesca Grifo, director of UCS's Scientific Integrity Program. "Nearly 900 EPA scientists reported political interference in their scientific work. That's 900 too many. Distorting science to accommodate a narrow political agenda threatens our environment, our health, and our democracy itself."

Goodness, [an anonymous survey of scientists](#), some who dislike it when their managers disagree with them. Let's see how his one becomes a scandal.

Tagged: [Environmental Protection Agency](#) , [EPA](#) , [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) , [Francesca Grifo](#) , [Julie MacDonald](#) , [Union of Concerned Scientists](#)

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