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1. ENDANGERED SPECIES: FWS to review 8 species decisions with MacDonald's 'blemish'

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The Fish and Wildlife Service will re-examine eight different endangered species decisions that had the touch of former Interior Department political appointee Julie MacDonald, Director Dale Hall confirmed today.

The agency will revisit its decision to decline protection for the white-tailed prairie dog and propose removing the Preble's jumping mouse. It will also review critical habitat listings for 12 Hawaiian picture wing flies and five other species. Three of the decisions are already being challenged in court.

"This is a blemish on the scientific integrity of the Department of Interior," Hall said.

Some of the decisions may be reversed or changed by the end of the process. "We wouldn't be doing this if we did not at least suspect that a decision will be different, but we don't know," Hall told reporters today.

MacDonald resigned in May as deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks after Interior Inspector General Earl Devaney issued a scathing report saying she had violated ethics rules, edited scientific decisions on endangered species issues and passed internal agency information to outside parties.

House Democrats have pressured Interior Department officials in hearings and letters this summer for a more thorough review of MacDonald's role in ESA decisions.

"I am heartened to hear that the Department of the Interior is stepping up to the plate to begin addressing the 'politics trumps science' ploy endemic throughout this administration," Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) said in a statement today.

But Rahall and environmental groups that have pressed for a review of species decisions said the agency should go even further. The congressman said there are more endangered species-related decisions "and goodness know what else" that deserve scrutiny.

Environmental groups say there are at least 15 other species that deserve review, including some like the greater sage grouse and Gunnison's prairie dog, where MacDonald's involvement was publicized in the press.

"This list is kind of a day late and a dollar short -- and in fact, many, many species short," said Melissa Waage of the Center for Biological Diversity, which has sued the administration over several of its species decisions. Waage said the species decisions appeared to be chosen for limited impact -- few listing or delisting decisions made the list.

Hall said he drafted the list by asking each of the FWS regional directors to review listing, delisting and critical habitat decisions from the past five years and report any with questions of "inappropriately modified" science. The directors came back with 11 species, then dropped the Mexican garter snake, because MacDonald had not reviewed it, and the contentious bull trout and marbled murrelet, because the questions on those listings revolved more on policy decisions, not science.

Decisions up for review:

- White-tailed prairie dog, 90-day petition finding.
- Preble's meadow jumping mouse, 12 month petition finding/proposed delisting.
- 12 species of Hawaiian picture-wing flies, proposed critical habitat.
- Preble's meadow jumping mouse, final critical habitat.
- Arroyo toad, final critical habitat.
- Southwestern willow flycatcher, final critical habitat.

- California red-legged frog, final critical habitat.
- Canada lynx, final critical habitat.