

Editorial

Sabotage; Risking wildlife

PROTECTIONS for endangered species were undercut by a political appointee to the Interior Department, according to inspector general findings released last week by Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., House Natural Resources chairman.

The 117-page report says Bush appointee Julie MacDonald repeatedly manipulated science and leaked secret agency reports to industry groups, seeking to benefit polluting industries.

For months, critics have accused MacDonald of trying to dilute federal environmental laws that impose limits on mining and timbering operations, as well as urban sprawl. The investigation by Inspector General Earl Devaney seems to confirm it.

Devaney recommended that MacDonald - who was promoted in 2004 to be the Interior Department's deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks - be punished for leaking information to private organizations opposed to pollution controls. Those groups included ChevronTexaco and the Pacific Legal Foundation, a property-rights group that often opposes protections for endangered species.

Devaney's study said MacDonald:

- Removed nearly 80 percent of 300 miles of streams in the Northwest's Klamath River Basin from protections designed to save bull trout.

- Tried to eliminate protections for a rare Rocky Mountains mouse, based on a questionable study.

- Pressured Fish and Wildlife Service officials to play down dangers to Kootenai River sturgeon in Idaho and Montana, so dam operations would not be curtailed.

- Tried to combine three different populations of a California salamander into one, thereby excluding it from the Endangered Species list.

If a student at Marshall, West Virginia University or any other university knowingly distorted scientific facts in a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, he or she would probably be denied a degree and face expulsion.

How can a major Interior Department official who did the same thing - with a more immediate impact on public policy - stay in public office?

During Bush's six years in the White House, his administration has granted endangered status to 57 species, but only after a lawsuit was filed in every case, according to **the Center for Biological Diversity**. Earlier administrations granted protective status to many more species: Clinton to 521, George H.W. Bush to 234 and Reagan to 253.

The Union of Concerned Scientists also has criticized MacDonald's efforts to eviscerate the Endangered Species Act.

Rahall plans hearings that will be "a sweeping review on whether politics is infiltrating decisions" about protecting endangered animals and plants. Good for him.