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ENDANGERED SPECIES: Lawsuit seeks to unearth Interior paper trail

Allison Winter, *Greenwire* reporter

Environmentalists are suing the Interior Department in a bid to unearth more information on possible political tampering with decisions on endangered species listings.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed suit last week in hopes of acquiring more documents on the handling of endangered species cases by Julie MacDonald, a former Interior deputy assistant secretary.

MacDonald resigned in May after a scathing report by Interior Inspector General Earl Devaney found she violated ethics rules, edited scientific decisions on endangered species issues and passed internal agency information to outside parties suing the department.

The Fish and Wildlife Service announced in November it would revise seven rulings that denied endangered species listings or limited critical habitat designations because MacDonald inappropriately influenced the decisions. Environmentalists think more decisions may have been affected and want to find out if other Bush administration officials were involved.

"We want to know how deep and wide did MacDonald's interference go,

and in fact did it even go broader and deeper than MacDonald herself," said Bill Snape, the group's attorney. "We have reason to believe that the answer to both those questions is 'yes,' and these are documents we are lawfully entitled to."

At issue are 10 Freedom of Information Act requests the group filed last year requesting information on MacDonald's involvement. The department is legally required to respond or ask for an extension within 20 days. Snape said the group has only received partial responses.

"This is not a full and complete set of MacDonald documents," Snape said.

Interior spokesman Hugh Vickery said he could not comment on the litigation, but that FOIA officers at the Fish and Wildlife Service do review and respond to requests like those filed by the center.

The Interior inspector general and the House Natural Resources Committee have also launched follow-up investigations of MacDonald's influence.

In November, FWS officials announced they would reverse decisions for seven species -- including the white-tailed prairie dog, Preble's jumping

mouse and Canada lynx -- because MacDonald had "inappropriately influenced" the decisions.

The Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups have mounted a larger campaign to challenge political interference in 55 different endangered species decisions nationwide. They had success with a similar lawsuit last month, when a federal judge ordered the agency to reconsider a previous decision not to add the sage grouse to the Endangered Species List.