

The post gave this anti-MacDonald oped a strange title. It's Noah's second MacDonald oped.

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## **Garter snake deserves protection**

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A few weeks ago, the media revealed illegal reversals of endangered species decisions ordered by Julie MacDonald, a political appointee in the Department of Interior. Though not a scientist, MacDonald has taken it upon herself to review, rewrite and often reverse major decisions regarding endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, for example, include an e-mail from MacDonald ordering FWS to exclude the entire Columbia River Power System, Northwest Forest Plan area, Willamette Valley, Malheur River and other large portions of the landscape from critical habitat for the threatened bull trout, resulting in a roughly 82 percent cut in protected habitat from proposed to final.

Other documents demonstrate MacDonald or other high-level officials reversed decisions to protect the Gunnison sage grouse, California tiger salamander, roundtail chub, Gunnison's and White-tailed prairie dogs, Mexican garter snake and a Mariana Islands plant.

When Congress wrote the Endangered Species Act, it required decisions regarding endangered species to be based solely on the best available science. The ultimate survival of some of the nation's most emblematic wildlife species and the health of our ecosystems might have been sacrificed otherwise. Embattled wildlife such as the bull trout are owed a fair shake. Interior must throw out MacDonald's tainted decisions but we also need to fix the bigger problems.

MacDonald's interference in scientific decisions concerning endangered wildlife is pervasive. In response to a 2005 survey conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 84 FWS scientists indicated they were directed to exclude or alter scientific information in their decisions. Several mentioned MacDonald by name. One wrote, "I have never before seen the boldness of intimidation demonstrated by a single political appointee. She has modified the behavior of the entire agency. I believe there should be a thorough investigation of her abuse of discretionary authority and modification of science information provided in FWS documents."

Things are getting worse. Last month the Bush administration tapped Todd Willens as a second deputy assistant secretary. Willens was senior policy director for Richard Pombo, R-Calif., the most anti-endangered-species congressman in recent history. Willens has been implicated in the Jack Abramoff scandal, having taken a trip to the Northern Mariana Islands arranged by the disgraced lobbyist in 1997 and accepting skybox seats in 2004 to a Washington Capitals game courtesy of tribes who paid Abramoff to lobby Pombo. Willens isn't the kind of guy we need overseeing the endangered species policy.

Dirk Kempthorne replaced Gale Norton as secretary of Interior. Seeking to distance himself from Norton's extreme industry leanings, he has projected an image of moderation. Hiring Willens undermines that image, as does the continued employment of MacDonald. Kempthorne will need to clean house if his claims of balance are to be believed.

Should Kempthorne fail to act, it will be at his own peril. Rep. Jay Inslee, D-Wash., has requested an investigation of MacDonald by Interior's inspector general and Democrats, including Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., who is slated to be the new chairman of the House Resources Committee, have pledged to launch a congressional investigation in the next session. Those investigations have the potential to drag down Kempthorne's administration.

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