

Old MacDonald had a farm ... and she didn't want any darn endangered fish getting in the way!

Now, this is unusual: Often when an administration official under pressure from Congress throws in the towel and slinks out of D.C., he or she is free to go, at least if nothing illegal went on.

But not so with Julie MacDonald, who was found by Department of Interior investigators to have altered scientific reports (she's trained as a civil engineer) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on endangered species, and of letting industry types get access to internal government reports. (We have to say that we appreciate government types who leak those internal reports; we are often the beneficiary. The government investigators were not amused, though.)



Comes now this story by Mike Taugher of the Contra Costa Times reporting that

MacDonald helped remove the Sacramento splittail from the list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act. Financial disclosure documents show she gets between \$100,000 and \$1 million annually from her interest in an 80-acre farm in the range of the fish, and she changed scientists' conclusion that the fish "is likely" declining to say it "may be."

Taugher's story spurred an investigation by Congressional democrats George Miller and Nick Rahall. Miller is quoted in his press release as saying:

It looks like another Bush Administration official was protecting her own bottom line instead of protecting the public interest.

Rahall and Miller asked Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to investigate, and Interior issued a prepared statement that said in part:

If it turns out that former Deputy Assistant Secretary MacDonald acted inappropriately regarding the Sacramento splittail, we will conduct an appropriate review of the regulatory process that led to the final decision.

Speaking of Kempthorne, did you know he's been in office for a full year today, and not a single species has been protected under the ESA on his watch? That's what the folks at the Center for Biological Diversity are pointing out today.

And speaking of the CBD, see if you think they could use a better sense of humor: Earlier this week they put out a press release entitled "MacDonald scandal grows," focusing on e-mails from industry lawyer Steve Quarles to MacDonald. From the group's press release:

On January 27, 2005, prominent industry lobbyist and anti-endangered species litigator Steven Quarles emailed MacDonald, requesting a meeting, in his own words, to "secure easy 'yeses' to outrageous requests." Later in the day Quarles emailed MacDonald's secretary, asking her to pass a message on to MacDonald to "just go in and erase all those back emails but I must admit I suspect some of them are mine...and, of course, THEY are critically important." If MacDonald deleted the emails as instructed, she may have violated federal laws prohibiting the deletion of government emails. Karl Rove is currently being investigated for similar charges.

Sounds like your typical D.C. backslapping lawyers' joshing with a friendly government official to us. Probably not the smartest thing to put into e-mails, though. Quarles at least should have used one of those emoticons. ;>)

- Robert McClure