

Revealed: Trump's Wildlife Service pick has ties to anti-animal protection groups

Aurelia Skipwith, nominee to lead US Fish and Wildlife Service, linked to groups opposed to protections for endangered species

Jimmy Tobias and Emily Holden in Washington, D.C., *The Guardian* Wed 25 Sep 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/25/trump-wildlife-service-pick-anti-animal-protection-groups-aurelia-skipwith>

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Donald Trump's nominee to lead the US Fish and Wildlife Service has links to powerful agricultural interests opposed to protections for endangered species she would oversee, the Guardian has learned.

Aurelia Skipwith, who is already a top official at the interior department, formerly worked at the agrochemical giant Monsanto.

New revelations show she also has ties to the Westlands Water District, a political powerhouse with a history of chafing against Endangered Species Act regulations that can interfere with farmers' demands for water in California.

Yet a Senate committee approved her nomination Wednesday in a party-line vote of 11-10.

Jayson O'Neill, deputy director of Western Values Project, a public lands watchdog group based in Montana, charged that Skipwith's resume – she is a lawyer with a master's degree in genetics – shows she is unqualified. He said Bernhardt is hiring her for her “deep ties to the swamp and special interests”.

Skipwith's fiance, Leo Giacometto, is a former lobbyist who worked on behalf of Westlands from 2005 to 2010 in his role as the founder of Gage International. Skipwith has said she was an “unpaid advisor” for Gage starting in 2013.

David Bernhardt, the interior secretary who would be Skipwith's new boss if she were confirmed, also lobbied for Westlands. Bernhardt in fact once sued the US government for Westlands, aiming to roll back protections for winter-run Chinook salmon in California.

Under Bernhardt's watch, Westlands has benefited from policy changes enacted by the interior department and its subagency, the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The interior department is currently working to loosen protections for imperiled fish in California, which would be a boon to Westlands and other irrigators who want to pull more water out of regional rivers and reservoirs. The rollback would likely harm endangered salmon, delta smelt, and other aquatic species in California.

As the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Skipwith would be crucially placed to shape the outcome of those efforts.

According to Senate lobbying records, Giacometto's firm lobbied for Westlands Water District from 2005 to 2010. During that time, Westlands paid Gage International more than \$200,000 to influence House and Senate policy on “water resource management issues”. Gage also lobbied for another influential California water district, the San Luis & Delta Mendota Water Authority, during approximately the same period.

Shortly after Westlands Water District ceased work with Giacometto's firm in 2010, it hired Bernhardt's former firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck to help lead its lobbying operations.

Skipwith is not required to disclose any information about her fiance's financial ties or involvement with Westlands because they are not yet married. Giacometto was prominent at Skipwith's confirmation hearing, where he was introduced as her fiance.

Skipwith's ties to Giacometto and Gage, and through them to Westlands Water District, raise questions about whether she will be able to act impartially when making critical decisions concerning water and wildlife policy in California, which are top priorities for Secretary Bernhardt and his Interior Department.

At her confirmation hearing earlier this month, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse highlighted Skipwith's past work for Monsanto, a leading producer of an herbicide that has been linked to negative effects on honeybees and other wildlife. Skipwith worked for the corporation from January 2006 to July 2012, according to her resume, mainly in crop science and corporate affairs.

In a written statement, the Interior Department argued Skipwith is in “full compliance” with federal ethics rules.

“Ms Skipwith has actively sought and consulted with senior career ethics officials,” said Russell Newell, spokesperson for the interior department. “Ms Skipwith started as an adviser with Gage International in 2013 well after the water district ended its (sic) contract with Gage in 2010.”