

September 8, 2019

The Honorable John Barrasso
Chairman
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate
410 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Tom Carper
Ranking Member
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate
410 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Subject: Opposition to the Confirmation of Aurelia Skipwith as Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Dear Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper:

We are writing to oppose the confirmation by the U.S. Senate of Ms. Aurelia Skipwith as Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). Ms. Skipwith lacks the training and experience necessary for this position. Her background consists largely of serving as a consultant or attorney dealing with non-wildlife and non-conservation issues. Ms. Skipwith's job history includes potential conflicts of interest which raise serious questions about her ability to act in the public interest for the welfare of public lands, migratory birds, fish, wildlife, and threatened and endangered species.

We write this letter as concerned Federal retirees with a combined 665.5 years of working for the Federal government (627.5 with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and 38 years with the National Park Service). Our jobs included Field Supervisor, Assistant Field Supervisor, Supervisory Fish and Wildlife Biologist, Supervisory Ecologist, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, Special Agent, Project Leader, Environmental Contaminants Specialist, Public Affairs Specialist, Freedom of Information Act Office, and Park Superintendent.

The practice by President Trump of placing unqualified people into positions of power undermines the morale of the Federal employees, weakens the public trust, and causes irreversible losses to precious natural resources.

Aurelia Skipwith Lacks the Training and Experience to be Director of the Service

Federal law 16 USC § 742(b) clearly states "...No individual may be appointed as the Director unless he is, by reason of scientific education and experience, knowledgeable in the principles of fisheries and wildlife management." While Ms. Skipwith holds a bachelor's degree in general biology, a master's degree in molecular genetics, and a law degree, she does not have the necessary education, experience,

or training in the principles of fish and wildlife management or conservation. Her career has been spent entirely in unrelated positions - crop science, patent and business law, and corporate affairs.

The Director of the Service must possess a high level of appropriate knowledge, experience, and competence because the approximately 9000-person agency is a science-heavy and complex organization to effectively manage and run. The agency's responsibilities encompass all aspects of the protection, conservation, and management of fish, wildlife, migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species at national and international levels. This requires its Director to have a comprehensive understanding of fisheries, land management, wildlife law enforcement, ecology, and conservation biology.

The Service has a long history of distinguished Directors who possessed advanced training and extensive experience in wildlife management, ecology, or biological conservation prior to their appointments as leaders of the agency. Former Wyoming State Senator John Turner (R-WY) possessed a master's degree in wildlife ecology, was an expert on the Bald Eagle and had extensive experience with wetlands. The late Mollie Beattie, the first woman to head the agency, had a master's degree in forestry, had served as Commissioner of the Vermont Commission of Forests, Parks, and Recreation, and had served as the Deputy Secretary of the Vermont Agency for Natural Resources. The last confirmed Director, Dan Ashe, was trained in marine affairs and wetlands, had served as Chief of the Service's National Wildlife Refuge Systems, and had served as the Science Advisor to the Director of the Service.

The current Administration also attempted to appoint another unqualified person to the position of Acting Director of the Service, but this candidate was prevented by his lack of educational qualifications. Greg Sheehan served as Deputy Director of the Service for 14 months from June 2017 to August 2018. According to a story by the Associated Press on October 23, 2018, former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke tried to appoint Acting Deputy Director Sheehan to the position of Acting Director of the Service, but Sheehan was barred from that position because he does not have a required science degree for the federal post.

Although Ms. Skipwith has a degree in molecular genetics, she lacks the necessary background, training, and experience in ecology, natural resources management, or biological conservation. Without this fundamental understanding of fish and wildlife resources, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for her to effectively guide and manage the complex and controversial issues surrounding the Nation's precious wildlife, fisheries, and imperiled species as is required of the Director of the Service. Simply stated, she does not meet the statutory qualifications as described in 16 USC § 742(b) for confirmation for the position.

Aurelia Skipwith has Demonstrated that She is Unsuitable to be Director of the Service

After completing her academic training, Ms. Skipwith spent nine years in a variety of positions, none of which were related to fisheries or wildlife, and all of which were apparently related to pest-control issues. This included an internship in 2013 at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and almost seven years at the Monsanto Company (2006-2012) bringing new agricultural products to the commercial market, managing operations and communications, and dealing with issues regarding conventional and GMO agricultural crops. Ms. Skipwith was General Counsel for AVC Global, a company she co-founded, from May 2016 to April 2017. She started her current position as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks at the Department of Interior in April 2017.

During Ms. Skipwith's short tenure in her current position at the Department of Interior, the agency has made unprecedented and biologically unsupportable changes that resulted in devastating consequences and irreparable harm to natural resources, public lands, wildlife, and the American public. Some of these include: scaling back protections to listed plants and animals, thereby weakening the Endangered Species Act; catering to the interests of the pesticide and fossil fuel companies, which harms wildlife and natural resources; and, severely altering the boundaries of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments in Utah to benefit private interests.

On August 12, 2019, with Ms. Skipwith serving as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, the Department of Interior made significant changes to the regulations implementing the Endangered Species Act. These new regulations not only provide absolutely zero benefit to endangered plants and animals, but they have far reaching negative impacts to the recovery and very survival of both currently listed species and those that are imperiled and currently without protection. The revisions fundamentally weaken section 4, the conditions under which species and critical habitat are listed or designated; allow the consideration of economic costs of protecting a species rather than solely biological issues during the listing process; and turn the process for protecting threatened species into a bureaucratic Gordian knot.

Further, the revisions tear out the essence of the protections and conservation for listed and proposed species carried out by Federal agencies under section 7. Since the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, section 7 has helped many listed species to persist, become more secure, and reduced the likelihood of their extinction. Studies have clearly demonstrated that the presence of endangered and threatened plants and animals have not prevented implementation of the vast majority of projects; most projects have proceeded with minimal delay and cost and minor modifications, while minimizing or avoiding adverse effects to the listed species.

During Ms. Skipwith's tenure at the Department of Interior, the Service repeatedly has put the interests of the pesticide industry ahead of imperiled wildlife. On August 8, 2018, Reuters reported the agency had reversed a 2014 decision prohibiting bee-killing neonicotinoid pesticides and genetically modified, pesticide-resistant crops on National Wildlife Refuges. Ms. Skipwith's tenure at Monsanto does not give us confidence that she would put natural resource concerns ahead of corporate concerns of pesticide companies.

On July 21, 2017, the Washington Post reported Ms. Skipwith ordered a review of Federal rules that prevented hunters from killing bears and wolves in National Parks and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in the State of Alaska using techniques that include killing of bear cubs and wolf pups with their mothers during the season when they are denning, baiting bears with greasy doughnuts in Denali National Park, and killing large predators for the sole purpose of increasing the number of game animals for hunting rather than maintaining natural ecosystems. Ms. Skipwith sent memos to the National Park Service and the Service in July 2017 requesting that they reassess rules on "...various prohibitions that directly contradict State of Alaska authorizations and wildlife management decisions."

Ms. Skipwith also played a key role in a decision that sets a precedent for coal mining companies to evade essential and necessary measures for the protection of endangered species, as reported by the Washington Post on May 10, 2019. From documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act, Ms. Skipwith worked closely with Landon Tucker Davis, a former coal lobbyist, who was Trump's campaign director in West Virginia and Virginia. After the November 2016, election, Davis was appointed to a political position at the Office of Surface Mining. There he was documented in emails obtained through

the Freedom of Information Act to have contacted Ms. Skipwith to expedite the approval of permits for mountaintop coal removal which the Service was reviewing as required by law, since they would affect federally endangered and threatened species. This political influence on Ms. Skipwith appears to have been successful.

In a July 7, 2017, email to Acting Director Sheehan, Ms. Skipwith stated she was concerned the Fish and Wildlife Service career biologists were "...overstepping their bounds..." and that the agency was "...stonewalling their ability to move forward claiming the (endangered) Guyandotte River and Big Sandy River crayfishes." This demonstrates her apparent lack of understanding of the Endangered Species Act and ties to industry and lobbyists. In a July 17, 2017, email, Vincent Devito, the Counselor for Energy Policy, a newly created appointed position at the Department of Interior, approved the projects without any federally required biological or legal review, restrictions, or approvals by the Service. This is a clear departure of the norm that appears to be in violation of fish and wildlife responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act.

The above examples show Ms. Skipwith's questionable leadership, lack of understanding of fish and wildlife resources, apparent conflicts of interest, and willingness to put corporate interests ahead of Service responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act.

Aurelia Skipwith should not be confirmed as Director of the Service

The Service is charged with protecting our public lands, fish, wildlife, migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species for all Americans, as well as future generations. Aurelia Skipwith's woeful lack of appropriate and necessary training and experience, potential conflicts of interest, industry ties, and questionable judgment make her ill-suited to lead the Agency and her confirmation would place our most cherished natural resources at great risk.

In the decades we spent working at the Service and the National Park Service, we saw firsthand the threats to our public lands, fish, wildlife, migratory birds, and listed and imperiled species. The position of Director is not one for which on-the-job training is appropriate. We believe that Aurelia Skipwith will fundamentally damage, significantly alter for the worse, and irretrievably undermine the protection of our Nation's heritage and the morale of the agency. Therefore, we strongly urge the U.S. Senate not to confirm her as the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

If you have any questions regarding this letter please contact Chris Nagano, Paula Halupa, or Steve Schwarzbach at foxbatnagano@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

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