The American public has a right to expect all science-based public policy decisions to be based on the best science available. In some cases, that is actually a legal requirement. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), for example, is required to use the best available science when making determinations about whether to list a species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

However, recently obtained documents demonstrate that Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie MacDonald has systematically distorted, manipulated, and misused the scientific process prescribed by the ESA. In several notable cases, this interference resulted in changing a “positive” finding – in favor of listing and thus providing greater protections to a species – to a “negative” finding. In making these changes, MacDonald, whose training is in engineering, overrode the recommendations of the agency’s own biologists.

A Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) survey of scientists at the FWS, released in February 2005, demonstrated pervasive political interference in science at the agency. The significant editing of scientific documents demonstrates that the misuse of science at the FWS has continued. Below, we describe Julie MacDonald’s documented suppressions of endangered species science and the larger problem of suppression of science within FWS.

**Political Appointee Julie MacDonald Reverses Scientists’ Decisions by Decree**

**Gunnison’s Prairie Dog**

The buff-colored Gunnison’s Prairie Dog lives in sagebrush grasslands in the four corners area of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado. Its current habitat has been reduced by more than 90% of its historical range, and the onslaught on its home territory has not diminished. Oil and gas drilling, urban sprawl, sylvatic plague, and continued shooting and poisoning of these animals all threaten the species with extinction.

Documents show that MacDonald directly tampered with a scientific determination by FWS biologists that the white-tailed prairie dog could warrant ESA protection, and further, prevented the agency from fully reviewing the animal’s status. Handwritten and Microsoft Word "track changes" edits show MacDonald herself eliminated or disregarded information from the draft finding that would have led to a positive determination, while declaring that further study is necessary. She also changed scientific conclusions, and even added erroneous scientific information that confused the distinct white-tailed and black-tailed prairie dog colonies. Accompanying emails indicate MacDonald ordered the finding to be changed from positive to negative.

**Roundtail Chub**

A similar reversal was made for a distinct population segment of the Roundtail Chub—a southwestern fish imperiled by a combination of non-native fish introductions and degradation of its stream and river habitat-- in the lower Colorado River Basin. In response to a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity to list the population, FWS determined that the lower Colorado River population of the Chub is not significant to the species as a whole and thus did not qualify for listing. This finding reversed the conclusions of the field office in Arizona, which determined that the population was significant because its loss would mean the species was eliminated from
roughly a third of its range, because it occurs in a unique ecological setting, and to a lesser extent because of
genetic differences.

**SCIENCE OVERTURNED AT POLITICIANS’ REQUEST**

**Gunnison Sage-grouse**

Gunnison Sage-grouse is a distinct species from Greater Sage-grouse and occurs in eight isolated populations in
southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Gunnison sage-grouse have experienced significant declines from
historic numbers and only about 4,000 breeding individuals remain.

The ESA listing for Gunnison Sage-grouse was subject to delay and then reversal by Julie MacDonald and other
Department of the Interior officials in Washington, DC. After exhaustive scientific study, FWS biologists and
regional and field staff prepared to list Gunnison Sage-grouse as “endangered” and recommend designation of
critical habitat for the species in summer 2006. The agency even drafted media releases to announce the proposed
listing. Then, documents show, MacDonald became involved after receiving three telephone calls concerning the
proposed listing, including one from the governor of Colorado.

MacDonald first delayed the proposed listing by questioning the science used to designate Gunnison Sage-grouse as
a separate species from Greater Sage-grouse. She was also involved as the FWS Headquarters required Region 6
(which submitted the listing) to reduce the substantial listing proposal to a mere outline of information—resulting
in the removal of much of the text that supported listing the species. Based on the outline, and contrary to the
recommendations of FWS biologists, sage grouse experts, and field staff, FWS Headquarters decided not to list the
species. Documents show that the Washington office was extensively involved in drafting the new "not warranted"
listing determination, demanding extensive edits to the former listing proposal. FWS biologists made a last attempt
to respond to and refute comments pertaining to the distinctness of the species, its historic range, the accuracy of
literature cited, and habitat loss and threats to the species, but the new information was disregarded.

**Tabernaemontana rotensis, a rare island plant**

Tabernaemontana rotensis is a medium-sized tree with white flowers and orange-red fruit that grows in the
Northern Mariana Islands. The species is reduced to approximately 30 plants found primarily on lands managed by
the U.S. Air Force. In 2000, FWS published a rule recognizing T. rotensis as a species and proposing to list it as an
endangered species. In April 2004, the decision to list was reversed because FWS decided to no longer recognize
T. rotensis as a species. Documents show that DOI made the decision not to recognize the species in response to
comments from the Air Force. This decision runs counter to the recommendations of the Pacific Islands office of
FWS, the primary scientists that work on the species, and the peer reviewers of the proposed rule, who all
supported listing, and to all of the published literature, except one book. Although we do not have direct evidence
of Julie MacDonald's involvement in this decision, which may only be because they redacted her name, the
documents do show direct meddling by DOI in undermining protection for a highly imperiled plant.

**SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS AT FWS**

**Lagging on listing**

The Center for Biological Diversity has found that FWS under the Bush Administration has protected the fewest
number of species (56) of any administration since the Act was passed at the lowest rate of any administration
(10/year). This compares to 512 species listed under the Clinton Administration and 234 under the Senior Bush

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: An Agency in Trouble**

A 2005 UCS survey of FWS scientists showed pervasive political interference in science at the agency. Nearly half
of all respondents whose work is related to endangered species scientific findings (44 percent) reported that they
"have been directed, for non-scientific reasons, to refrain from making jeopardy or other findings that are protective
of species." One in five agency scientists revealed they have been instructed to compromise their scientific
integrity—reporting that they have been "directed to inappropriately exclude or alter technical information from a
FWS scientific document." In essay question responses, a few scientists named Julie MacDonald as a significant
part of the problem and called for her removal to help restore scientific integrity to the agency. See