

Two Sides to Every Story:
Former Deputy Assistant Interior Secretary Responds to Allegations

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There are many interests in Washington and the national media that are dedicated to laying blame on the Bush Administration and, by association, Western farmers and water users, no matter what the facts say. The mainstream media's apparent ready acceptance of arguments generated by environmental activists is a growing concern, especially when one-sided media coverage is seen as influencing environmental policy that has very real ramifications for rural communities.

The recent example of "trial by media" concerns the tragic and unfair public pillorying of Julie MacDonald, a former deputy assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of the Interior. All year long, environmental groups and their allies in Congress have kept the pressure on senior Interior officials over alleged heavy-handed management of Endangered Species Act (ESA) administrative issues. MacDonald was subjected to particularly withering fire for allegedly altering scientific field reports to minimize protections for imperiled species. She resigned from the Department in May after an Inspector General's (IG) report appeared to support allegations made by environmental activists. Those allegations included charges that she had unreasonably interfered with scientific findings relative to ESA issues and that she had conducted herself outside the chain of command by interacting directly with field personnel. Having reviewed the ESA decisions in which MacDonald involved herself, Interior has determined that eight additional decisions –many in California - must now be reviewed, and perhaps, reversed or modified.

California urban newspapers essentially broadcast the claims made by environmental groups, painting an unflattering portrait of MacDonald. Politicians – critics of the Bush Administration – joined the fray, and on July 31, the House Natural Resources Committee ("Committee") conducted an oversight hearing, where the IG's report on MacDonald was a key topic of discussion. Recall that this was the same hearing scheduled by the Democrat leadership to debate allegations that Vice President Cheney somehow exerted political influence to help farmers at the expense of Klamath River fish.

Through all of this, Julie MacDonald has remained silent, which has allowed the charges levied by her critics to go unchallenged. As a result, those charges are now routinely repeated by the media (who were "leaked" the report, without a response from MacDonald), and now reported as facts. But recently, we are beginning to see others tell the other side of Julie MacDonald's story.

At the July 31 congressional oversight hearing, government witnesses involved with the IG investigations were grilled on the MacDonald matter. Mary Kendall, Deputy IG for Interior, testified that the Interior investigation determined that MacDonald did inject herself personally in a number of ESA issues, particularly those that had the potential to impact her home state, California, such as the splittail minnow.

“Overall, the impact of Ms. MacDonald’s conduct on the Department of the Interior has been considerable,” said Kendall. “It has cast a vast cloud over the Department’s scientific integrity.”

However, U.S. Rep. McMorris (R-WASHINGTON) and Rep. Cannon (R-UTAH) provided initial suggestions that, perhaps, the entire MacDonald story had not yet been heard on this matter.

“The American people deserve to know more about this situation,” said Ms. McMorris. “I’m sure the public doesn’t know that this grandmother never had a chance to refute the allegations levied against her and that there could be many sides of the story. She has been unfairly called a future “convict” by a senior member of this Committee already, but there’s no basis for such irresponsible talk - especially when the Inspector General found that she did nothing illegal.”

For the first time, the broader public discovered that MacDonald had submitted a written response to the Interior Department allegations. After the hearing, it became apparent that questions lingered in the minds of some regarding MacDonald’s ability to address the charges made against her, and how her input was factored into the IG report. And finally, five weeks later, at least one newspaper stepped forward to tell the rest of the story.

The Colorado Springs *Gazette* on September 6 presented an editorial that summarizes MacDonald’s response to the IG and even includes a link to the IG report and her very thorough response:

http://www.gazette.com/opinion/macdonald_26957_article.html/report_esa.html.

The *Gazette* piece is balanced and complete. It is relevant to the paper’s readers because many of them could be impacted by the proposed de-listing of the Preble’s meadow jumping mouse, protected under the ESA, which falls under Interior Department purview.

In a nutshell, the *Gazette* concludes “she’s been railroaded”.

The *Gazette* editorial is an eye-opener, and introduces some key facts that previous reporters apparently missed:

- ☞ MacDonald says she was never solicited by the IG for an opportunity to rebut its report;
- ☞ IG’s report insinuated that MacDonald altered range estimates for a protected bird, the southwest willow flycatcher, because a critical habitat designation might impact her “ranch” in California. But MacDonald’s property — which is not a sprawling “ranch,” but 80 acres of row crops — is nearly 300 miles from flycatcher habitat;
- ☞ MacDonald said the law requires that the best available science be used, but she found that “FWS did not always consider all the data and often ‘cherry picked’ for sources and reviewers which supported their position.”

The *Gazette* editors sadly observe that the record may be impossible to set straight. And it asks a question that everyone who jumped on the “bash Julie MacDonald” bandwagon should be pondering:

Where does Julie MacDonald go to get her reputation back?