

Our View - Wednesday

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We smell a rat Fish and Wildlife accused of gaming the science

Sen. Wayne Allard leveled serious allegations of scientific and regulatory malpractice against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Monday, claiming in a letter to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne that the agency waged a behind-the-scenes campaign to keep the Preble's meadow jumping mouse on the endangered species list by ignoring or discrediting science that contradicted its regulatory wishes.

Further, the letter says agency officials conspired with outside academics and environmental groups to discredit Dr. Rob Ramey, the biologist who first challenged the mouse's status as a subspecies, based on DNA and morphological analysis. Ramey's findings embarrassed the agency, stirred controversy and led to a still-pending petition to de-list the mouse.

Ramey echoes some of the allegations in written testimony submitted to the House Natural

Resources Committee for a hearing held Tuesday, claiming that "obfuscation, intimidation and ignoring contrary evidence have contributed to the continued ESA-listing of the Preble's mouse subspecies."


These are serious enough allegations, coming from credible enough sources, that Kempthorne should ask for a thorough and independent investigation. The Resources Committee should also investigate, as long as it is looking into allegations that the Bush administration is tailoring science to conform with political agendas.

If the allegations are true, a housecleaning is in order at the Region 6 office of USFWS. A much broader review of ESA science also is called for, not just dealing with alleged efforts by political appointees to skew the science, but the role agency insiders, agenda-driven academics and environmental groups play in listing and de-listing decisions.


Internal agency e-mails Allard's office has reviewed "paint what appears to be a troubling picture of a coordinated effort on behalf of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff to retain the listed status of the Preble's regardless of what the best available science tells us," Allard wrote. He says agency staff collaborated with other government personnel, academics and outside groups to skew public perceptions in favor of keeping the mouse listed, by attempting to discredit Ramey and by ignoring science that doesn't support de-listing.

"It appears that FWS staff set their minds on

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rebutting Ramey whatever the cost,” Allard wrote, because they felt “threatened and angered” by Ramey’s work. The agency secretly went out and found a hired gun, also on the federal payroll, who could be counted on to contradict Ramey’s conclusions. They put pressure on Ramey’s employer, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, which ultimately led to Ramey’s exit from the job (under circumstances first written about by Vince Carroll at the Rocky Mountain News.) Agency personnel worked with outside allies and a government contractor to game a scientific review of the conflicting reports in their favor, according to Allard.

“With the help of interested parties in academia, and perhaps environmental groups, FWS employed and funded an agency ally, USGS researcher Dr. Tim King, to protect Preble’s listed status,” Allard writes. “After this, FWS staff influenced what was to be an ‘independent review’ of the genetic and taxonomic issues related to Prebles.”

This culminated, as readers may recall, in the creation of a supposedly independent panel, assembled by a contractor, the Sustainable Ecosystems Institute, tasked with sorting out the seemingly contradictory findings of King and Ramey. SEI came down on the side of King, after a two-day hearing in Fort Collins that Ramey likened to an inquisition rather than a scientific hearing. Allard suggests the process may have been rigged in King’s favor.

“Upon review of numerous correspondences I am concerned that outside influences may have been

exerted in the Preble’s panel.” Allard points to the incomplete posting of papers and documents on the agency’s Preble’s mouse page as further evidence that bureaucrats are attempting to spin public perceptions and present one-sided science. The agency also consistently ignores studies or data that indicate the mouse is more abundant than claimed.

It’s a long and potentially damning list of allegations — which can be read in its entirety by using the “Opinion” link at Gazette.com. The senator showed courage in bringing them forward, given the vilification that’s heaped on those who dare challenge the validity of ESA science or the credibility of USFWS.

In his testimony (which also is posted at Gazette.com), Ramey echoes some of Allard’s allegations — including the attempts to smear and discredit him by one USFWS staff member. He cites other cases of slipshod science being used in listing or critical habitat decisions. Among other things, he says the agency for a decade ignored trapping data that show the mouse is more plentiful than claimed.

“In the case of the Preble’s mouse,” Ramey wrote, “the record will ultimately show that special interest groups, individuals and academicians with vested financial interests, and some U.S. Fish and Wildlife staff, have managed to maintain an invalid . . . ESA listing by obfuscation, intimidation and ignoring contrary evidence.” Ramey, who worked for a time as a scientific trouble-shooter under contract to the Department of Interior, said the “Preble’s case is not an isolated incident,” but is “symptomatic of

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deeper problems within agencies charged with administration of the ESA.”

These allegations deserve the prompt and aggressive attention of Kempthorne and USFWS Director H. Dale Hall, who has pledged to restore the integrity of science at the agency. Hall and the department’s inspector general have been focusing on the alleged meddling in ESA science by former Interior Department official Julie MacDonald. But agenda-driven science by agency insiders, colluding with outside parties, deserves equal attention.

Only a comprehensive, outside review of ESA related decision-making — including the allegations by Allard and Ramey — will lift this cloud from the law and the agency.

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