

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 10, 2003

Earl Devaney
Inspector General
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Devaney:

We request that your office begin an immediate investigation into the recent decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove its Region 6 science experts from the process of formulating a new biological opinion on the Missouri River.

The decision by the Fish and Wildlife Service to remove these scientists at this critical juncture and replace them with its handpicked individuals calls into question the Fish and Wildlife Service's ability to conduct an unbiased consultation with the Corps of Engineers on this matter. In 2000, these scientists produced a biological opinion calling for the restoration of more natural flows along the Missouri River. That opinion was based on a decade of work and review. It was also subsequently validated by an independent panel of experts jointly selected by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the National Academy of Sciences. The facts to date have demonstrated that the 2000 biological opinion is more valid today than when it was first drafted.

The timing of the removal of the Region 6 scientists is highly suspect, as the Fish and Wildlife Service has been directed to complete a new biological opinion in relatively short order. Documentation necessary for consultation on this matter was only recently submitted to the agency. Replacing the scientists who are most knowledgeable about this issue will not permit an informed, careful evaluation to determine if changes in the 2000 biological opinion are warranted. In addition, we understand that the Administration has prevented these scientists from obtaining an independent peer review of their work. It appears to us as if the Fish and Wildlife Service is manipulating the facts to fit a predetermined conclusion. If the Fish and Wildlife Service is genuinely interested in letting sound science determine the course of action – as is required by law – why is it seeking to replace these scientists at this time? There is simply no justification for this move, and it appears as though politics has triumphed over longstanding science and undisputed facts.

The Corps of Engineers has stated it will issue a new Missouri River Master Water Control Manual by March 1, 2004. Given the tight timeline under which a review of the biological opinion must be completed to ensure delivery by that date, we ask that you commence this investigation immediately. Pending the completion of the investigation, we ask that the Fish and Wildlife Service be barred from replacing the Region 6 scientists.

Sincerely,



KENT CONRAD



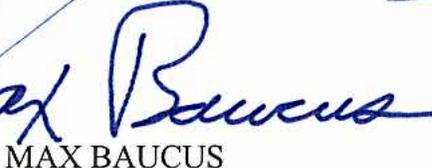
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