

# Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society

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Ghassan (Gus) N. Rassam  
President, American Fisheries Society  
5410 Grosvenor Lane  
Bethesda, Maryland 20814

Dear Gus:

At the 2005 annual meeting of the Montana Chapter AFS, a grave concern was brought to the attention of the membership. Recently, the Union of Concerned Scientists & Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility released the results of a survey of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service field scientists. At field offices around the country, USFWS scientists tell of being asked to change scientific information, remove scientific facts from reports, or come to conclusions that are not supported by science. As a result, the USFWS scientists say that endangered and threatened fish and wildlife are not being protected as intended by the Endangered Species Act.

The following is a summary of the survey's findings provided by the Union of Concerned Scientists:

- **Large numbers of agency scientists reported political interference in scientific determinations.** Nearly half of all respondents whose work is related to endangered species (44%) report that they have been directed for non-scientific reasons to refrain from making findings that protect species. One in five have been instructed to compromise their scientific integrity, reporting that they have been "*directed to inappropriately exclude or alter technical information from a USFWS scientific document.*" In the Southwest region, that number was even higher, closer to one in three.
- **Agency scientists reported being afraid to speak frankly about issues and felt constrained in their role as scientists.** Forty-two percent said they could not publicly express "*concerns about the biological needs of species and habitats without fear of retaliation,*" while 30 % were afraid to do so even within the agency. A third felt they are not allowed to do their jobs as scientists.
- **There has been a significant strain on staff morale.** Half of the respondents reported that morale is poor to extremely poor; only 12% believed morale to be good or excellent. And 64% did not feel the agency is moving in the right direction.
- **Political intrusion has undermined the USFWS's ability to fulfill its mission.** Three out of four staff scientists felt that the USFWS is not "*acting effectively to maintain or enhance species and their habitats.*"

In one of numerous essays submitted on the topic of improving scientific integrity at the USFWS, one biologist wrote: "*We are not allowed to be honest and forthright. I have 20 years of federal service in this, and this is the worst it has ever been.*" Another biologist reported that Department of Interior officials "*have forced upper-level managers to say things that are incorrect.*" A manager wrote: "*There is a culture of fear of retaliation in mid-management.*"

Encouragingly, it is clear from the survey that USFWS scientists are committed to and proud of their work and believe in the potential of the agency to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats. However, political intervention is having a chilling effect on the ability of USFWS scientists to carry out the agency's mission.

Despite agency directives not to reply (even on their own time) nearly 30% of the surveyed scientists returned surveys. A summary of the survey and its methodology can be seen at: <http://www.ucsusa.org/rsi>.

The officers of the Montana Chapter of the AFS feel that the results of this survey warrant action by the AFS. We feel that AFS should undertake its own survey or investigate the survey of the UCS. If the claims appear substantiated, then AFS should mount a public campaign, demanding that government scientists should be free to report their findings. In fact, they should be encouraged to do so without fear of political retaliation. AFS should insist that natural resource science should be critiqued by scientific peer review & not by special interests.

Thank you for considering our request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Clint Muhlfeld" with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Clint Muhlfeld  
President, Montana Chapter AFS