

Choice for Head of Wildlife Agency Provokes Dissent

By Juliet Eilperin
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, October 6, 2005; A25

This morning, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is likely to easily approve the nomination of Dale Hall, a regional director in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to head the agency -- making the full Senate vote a formality.

It's the kind of vote that makes environmentalists cringe.

Hall, a 27-year Fish and Wildlife Service veteran, has infuriated wildlife activists, not to mention some of his staff, by not pushing more aggressively to protect threatened and endangered species in the Southwest. In May, he told agency biologists they should rely on the genetic science available at the time of a species' listing when deciding whether to recommend new safeguards for an imperiled plant or animal, even if that science dated back to the 1970s.

"He consistently tries to get the staff to change the science," said retired agency biologist Sally Stefferud, who worked under Hall during part of her 20-year tenure at Fish and Wildlife. She predicted "substantially less protection for the species" under Hall's leadership.

But Senate Democrats and the Bush administration do not see it that way. Diane Derby, a spokeswoman for the ranking member of the Environment and Public Works Committee, James M. Jeffords (I-Vt.), said there has been little opposition to Hall's nomination and she expects "a quick and easy vote."

Interior Department spokesman Hugh Vickery noted that Hall received the department's "meritorious service award" under the Clinton administration for his work on Interior's Northwest Forest Plan. He praised Hall's record as a biologist at the agency, saying that "he has worked to conserve wildlife and its habitat from the Everglades to the Northwest forests." The administration declined to make Hall available for comment yesterday, citing the confirmation vote.

David Parsons, another retired Fish and Wildlife biologist who started at the agency around the same time as Hall, said the two originally saw themselves as the agency's "eco-warriors." But Hall changed over time, said Parsons, who said he disagreed with Hall's decision to put a moratorium on the release of Mexican gray wolves in the Southwest.

Rep. Raul M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) has also questioned the nominee's approach to protecting the wolves, noting in a letter to the Senate committee that this year Hall has suspended meetings of the Southwest gray wolf recovery team that is assigned to draft a wolf conservation plan.

But groups such as the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and the Southwest Tribal Fisheries Association support Hall. The tribal group's chairman, Arthur "Butch" Blazer, wrote the Senate that "Dale has demonstrated a keen understanding and respect for the unique position tribes hold as sovereign nations."

This praise has not swayed Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, who said, "Hall was picked because he has proven himself to be the Darth Vader of endangered species."