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Did federal agency set up Norton?

By **MATTHEW A. CRONIN**

In the Washington Post (Oct. 19) and Anchorage Daily News (Oct. 20) Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton was criticized by anonymous employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

The criticism focused on Secretary Norton's omission of information provided by the FWS in a letter, and her reference to a scientific paper in the "Wildlife Society Bulletin" in her response to Sen. Frank Murkowski's questions about oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In the Post article, the FWS claimed it was careful to send Secretary Norton a complete and balanced portrait of the science in a letter. As I describe below, the FWS did not provide a balanced view, ignored relevant published papers, and gave speculative cause-effect appraisals of oil field impacts.

I am the senior author of the WSB article referenced by Secretary Norton, in which data on caribou in the oil field areas were presented. The data, originally reported by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, were updated in a 2001 issue of the WSB. The numbers of animals in the oil field areas declined between 1992-1995 and then increased between 1995-2000.

Secretary Norton's critics claim that by omitting some of the FWS information, she was not using the best available information. In fact, she did a more thorough review of the issue than the FWS. The FWS ignored scientific papers on caribou and oil fields, while Secretary Norton used the FWS information and other published science. I will point out shortcomings of the FWS letter, focusing on one specific question:

What has been the impact of development in Prudhoe Bay on the Central Arctic Caribou Herd?

The FWS letter was selective and did not reference several papers on caribou and Alaskan oil fields in scientific journals. Omission of relevant peer-reviewed literature is a serious flaw, and reflects incompetence, ignorance or a deliberate attempt to mislead the secretary. I will provide these papers to readers (M. Cronin, LGL Alaska Research



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The information in the FWS letter was speculative regarding two primary impacts on caribou: displacement during calving and obstruction of movements, and nutritional/reproductive impacts.

Regarding displacement and obstruction, the FWS letter states that calving "essentially ceased" after 1977 in the industrial complex near Prudhoe Bay and Deadhorse. However, the extent of calving before development is not well known, and may have been uncommon. The quality and quantity of data supporting the premise that calving ceased is poor, but the FWS presented it without qualification.

The FWS letter also states that mid-summer movement of caribou along the coast was blocked by roads, pipes, and facilities. The FWS did not reference three published papers documenting extensive use of, and movements through, the oil fields. Thus, the FWS letter selectively presented information.

The FWS letter also states that cows with young calves were displaced from developed areas by four or more kilometers. In fact, in the study cited, displacement was from only one road at Milne Point, and was statistically significant only within one kilometer of the road. The FWS letter is inaccurate regarding calving distributions and development.

Regarding nutrition and reproduc-

tive impacts, the FWS letter refers to data in an abstract and unpublished reports and suggests that under some combinations of weather and animal density the oil fields impacted calf production, and under other conditions, they did not. This is possible, but speculative and not the only interpretation.

Colleagues and I addressed these issues in the Journal of Wildlife Research in 1997 and the WSB articles noted above. First, the numbers of caribou in the oil fields were high in 1992, declined between 1992 and 1995, and increased from 1995-2001. Attributing the decline in 1995 to oil fields is a limited interpretation.

First, movements between the developed and undeveloped ranges can be as high as 18 percent and account for the changes in numbers.

Second, the density of animals in the developed ranges was higher than in the undeveloped ranges in some years so density or oil fields may have contributed to low calf production.

Third, I am not aware of any published analysis of impacts of weather in the early 1990s. The potential for the oil fields to impact calf production is a legitimate hypothesis, but the FWS gave a speculative cause-effect interpretation and ignored published alternatives.

A final point, not included in the FWS letter, is that dual management objectives of producing oil and maintaining the caribou herd have been met during the period of oil field development. These points were emphasized in a paper by colleagues and I in "Biological Conservation" in 1998.

In summary, I believe the FWS gave Secretary Norton incomplete and biased information for her presentation to Congress. The Secretary used additional information for which she should be commended. Rather than considering Secretary Norton as unethical as she was accused, I submit that the FWS acted at best incompetently, and at worst unethically, in this case.

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