XX, 2019

**Re: Opposition to the Nomination of Aurelia Skipwith as Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

Dear Senators,

On behalf of our organizations and millions of members, we urge you to reject the nomination of Aurelia Skipwith to be the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In her role as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Ms. Skipwith has undermined scientific integrity and the work of career scientists at the Service and circumvented the Endangered Species Act at the behest of the coal industry, putting numerous species at risk of extinction. In addition, while Ms. Skipwith has worked for two years within the Department, her prior experience does not meet the statutory requirements — that an individual have scientific training and experience in wildlife and fisheries management — that are required by law to be the Director of Fish and Wildlife Service.

As detailed in an exposé by the Washington Post, and in records obtained via the Freedom of Information Act, Ms. Skipwith was instrumental in an effort to undermine safeguards for endangered wildlife in Appalachia, including the Guyandotte River and Big Sandy crayfish, to green-light mountaintop coal mines owned by political benefactors of the Trump administration.[[1]](#footnote-1) Ms. Skipwith pushed to overrule the career scientists at the Service that were attempting to develop conservation measures to protect two endangered crayfish caused by water pollution from these mines. At Ms. Skipwith’s insistence, an industry-written plan was deemed acceptable, even when the career scientists had warned it would ravage the crayfishes’ habitat. Scientific integrity is the hallmark of what makes the Endangered Species Act the most effective conservation law in the world. Her actions blindsided Service scientists who were following the law’s clear mandate to use the best available science in developing a conservation plan for these species.

In her two years as a political appointee within the Department of Interior, Ms. Skipwith has been involved in efforts to weaken the Endangered Species Act’s implementing regulations and strip protections from our nation’s most vulnerable species, including the grizzly bear, American burying beetle, Mexican wolf, and dunes sagebrush lizard. Her official calendars show she was also involved in efforts to weaken the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, weaken protections for the wildlife refuge network from dangerous pesticides, and weaken protections for National Monuments. Ms. Skipwith is clearly ideologically opposed to the mission of the Fish and Wildlife Service, and would not be able to separate her personal biases from the science-based decisions required of the Director.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is a unique federal agency that regularly deals with complex scientific issues relating to the conservation of the natural world at the local, national and global scale. Recognizing this, Congress took the unusual step of requiring that the President only appoint a Director who is “by reason of scientific education and experience, knowledgeable in the principles of fisheries and wildlife management.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Ms. Skipwith’s academic and professional career demonstrate that, while accomplished, she lacks the necessary scientific education and experience to be the Director.

As recently as 2013, Ms. Skipwith was a summer legal intern with the U.S. Department of Agriculture where she worked in the Office of Technology Transfer and the Foreign Agriculture Service. She was general counsel at AVC Global, a company she co-founded, and she worked at Monsanto prior to law school. Ms. Skipwith has certainly had a successful career, but none of her experiences or education remotely qualifies her to run the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Every one of the 12 prior directors of the Fish and Wildlife Service since 1964 has had, at a minimum, a degree in fisheries or wildlife management or a closely related field. One prior Director has had a Ph.D., eight had master’s degrees, and three had bachelor’s degrees in a wildlife field. More importantly, nearly all prior directors of the Fish and Wildlife Service spent significant time either working within the Fish and Wildlife Service or at a state fish and game agency. The average amount of time served by prior directors before being nominated was approximately 16.5 years of relevant experience. Ms. Skipwith, unfortunately, has no relevant work experience related to conservation or wildlife management.

**PAST DIRECTORS OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**

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| **Name** | **Presidential Administration** | **Period Served** | **Confirmed?** | **Experience/Education in Wildlife Management** |
| Dan Ashe | Obama | 2011-2017 | YES | M.S. in Marine Affairs; 15 years at FWS |
| Sam Hamilton (died in office) | Obama | 2009-2011 | YES | B.S. in Biology; 30 years at FWS |
| H. Dale Hall | G.W. Bush | 2005-2009 | YES | M.S. in Fisheries Management; 27 years at FWS |
| Steven A. Williams | G.W. Bush | 2002-2005 | YES | Ph.D in Forestry; 7 years at Massachusetts Div. of Fisheries and Wildlife |
| Jamie Rappaport Clark | Clinton | 1997-2001 | YES | M.S. in wildlife ecology; 13 years at FWS |
| Mollie Hanna Beattie | Clinton | 1993-1996 | YES | M.S. in Forestry; 5 years at VT Dept. of Forests & Nat. Resources |
| John F. Turner | G.H.W. Bush | 1989–1993 | YES | M.S. in Wildlife Management; WY State Senator for 20 years |
| Frank Harper Dunkle | Reagan | 1986-1989 | YES | M.S. in Wildlife Management; 17 years Montana Fish and Game; 3 years at FWS |
| Robert A. Jantzen | Reagan | 1981–1985 | YES | B.S. in Wildlife Management; 30 years at AZ Game and Fish Depart |
| Lynn Adams Greenwalt | Nixon/Carter | 1974–1981 | YES | M.S. in Wildlife Management; 21 years at FWS |
| Spencer H. Smith | Nixon | 1970–1973 | YES | B.S. in Wildlife Management; 17 years at FWS |
| John S. Gottschalk | Nixon | 1964–1970 | YES | M.S. in Fisheries Management; 19 years at FWS |

Ms. Skipwith’s overall lack of experience and background in wildlife management, together with her ideological opposition to the protection of our nation’s wildlife, disqualifies her for such a critical position. For these reasons, we strongly urge you to oppose Ms. Skipwith’s nomination as Director of FWS.

Sincerely,

**Center for Biological Diversity**

**Animal Welfare Institute**

**Atlanta Audubon Society**

**Citizens Coal Council**

**Coal River Mountain Watch**

**Coastal Plains Institute**

**Delaware Ecumenical Council on Children and Families**

**Endangered Habitats League**

**Endangered Species Coalition**

**Environmental Protection Information Center**

**Friends of the Earth US**

**Howling for Wolves**

**Kentucky Resources Council, Inc.**

**Klamath Forest Alliance**

**Mass Audubon**

**Northern Jaguar Project**

**Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition**

**Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility**

**Rocky Mountain Wild**

**Save the Manatee Club**

**Shawnee Forest Defense!**

**Trap Free Montana**

**Trap Free Montana Public Lands**

**Valley Watch, Inc.**

**WCH Consulting, Inc.**

**Western Nebraska Resources Council**

**Western Watersheds Project**

**WildEarth Guardians**

**Wild Zone Conservation League**

1. *See* Juliet Eilperin, How the West Virginia coal industry changed federal endangered species policy, The Washington Post (May 10, 2019) *available at*: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/how-the-west-virginia-coal-industry-changed-federal-endangered-species-policy/2019/05/10/56d28de0-4bf0-11e9-b79a-961983b7e0cd_story.html?utm_term=.8b9d794bac05> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 16 U.S.C. §742(b). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)