

# By Any Name, Biological Service Appears to Be Endangered Species

6/27/95  
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Government agencies all over Washington are under attack these days as the Republican-led Congress slashes through budgets and programs. But if there were a prize for most besieged corner of the federal bureaucracy, it would almost certainly be won hands-down by the National Biological Service.

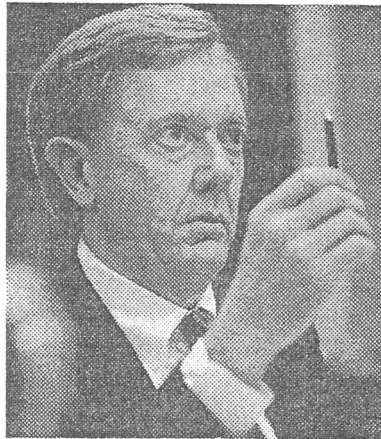
Conceived by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt as a way to centralize his department's scattered scientific capabilities and to separate research functions from the regulatory role of agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the NBS has been under almost continuous attack since its founding in 1993.

It is vilified as a threat to private property rights, with critics conjuring an image of environmental zealots invading people's back yards to find endangered species so they can bring economic development to a screeching halt. Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), chairman of the House Resources Committee, has scorned its scientists as "federal goons." Other lawmakers want to abolish it entirely. And its budget, already tiny by the standards of many agencies, is in the process of being pecked to death.

If all that weren't enough, the 1,300 besieged employees can't be sure from one day to the next what the name of their agency is. It started out as the National Biological Survey. But that name fueled fears that its scientists would be sneaking around the country looking for new endangered species, so Babbitt had it changed to the National Biological Service.

An appropriations subcommittee initially wanted to change the name again to the Bureau of Biological Research, but for Congress, even the mention of biology is apparently too threatening. So the subcommittee decreed that it would henceforth be known as the Life Sciences Research Service, and beginning in October would be stripped of its status as a separate agency and be made part of the venerable U.S. Geological Survey.

Permitting himself the luxury of some black humor last week, NBS Director H. Ronald Pulliam said,



**BRUCE BABBITT**

... sought to centralize research

"We've spent more money on stationery than anything else."

A soft-spoken ecologist who previously ran a research institute at the University of Georgia, Pulliam is baffled and angered by the treatment NBS has been accorded by the political world, which he likens to a "mob lynching."

"To me the biggest shock is how political everything is," he said. "I could deal with the situation if there was a careful consideration of the merits of what we are doing. . . . Instead there are people who are politically motivated, who've found this a useful tool" with which to attack Babbitt.

Congress and some members of the public, Pulliam said, grossly misunderstand what the NBS is all about. Surveying the nation's biological resources, the task that has engendered so much fear, is actually a tiny part of the NBS's overall mission, he said. Most of the agency's work—studying biological change and how to manage the nation's biological resources—is the very same basic research that scientists have been doing at other agencies within the Interior Department for many years.

For example, the NBS is continuing an assessment of Great Lakes fish stocks that has been going on for four decades and is critical to managing sport and commercial fisheries in the lakes. Other NBS activities, such as the 30-year-old breeding bird survey and research into exotic invading species like the zebra mussel, are also long-standing research activities of the department.

Pulliam also argues that much NBS research has applications that are good for business. He cites research into non-native, noxious grasses and weeds on western rangelands, where cattlemen have a direct economic stake in controlling nuisance plants and encouraging native grasses that provide better forage.

The agency also is emphasizing more and better research into species not yet on the endangered and threatened species lists, with the goal of preventing their listing and the possible economic disruptions that could result. For example, the agency is working with the International Paper Co. to modify its practice of purposely setting fires, in order to protect bogs that are home to plants that could become endangered.

"Many congressmen tell me science will be used to stop development," Pulliam said. "I am convinced that science will be the solution to allow economic prosperity to coexist with a healthy environment."

But Pulliam and his colleagues are fighting a powerful tide on Capitol Hill. Rep. Wayne Allard (R-Colo.) is petitioning Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) to bless his drive to abolish the NBS, which he has called "a back-door attempt to expand the sweep of the Endangered Species Act." The influential Heritage Foundation has charged that the NBS is determined to impose ecosystem-wide planning on the country, which it calls "nothing more than an attempt to convert private land to public use without compensation."

Even if it stays alive, the NBS is facing budget cuts in the range of 20 percent to 40 percent. A House Appropriations subcommittee has recommended the agency's budget be cut to \$112 million from this year's figure of \$166 million. The full Appropriations panel will decide this week whether to follow that recommendation.

Pulliam said cuts of that magnitude would devastate Interior's scientific capabilities and result in the closure of some research centers such as the Great Lakes Science Center. "To say we don't need scientific information because it might be used against us is a Dark Ages attitude," Pulliam said. "But unfortunately there is a movement, being fed by misinformation and paranoia, that science is the problem."