

GloucesterTimes.com, Gloucester, MA

October 24, 2010

EDITORIAL: Scripted answers raise flags regarding NOAA coverup

The case for a criminal investigation into Dale Jones Jr., deposed director of fisheries enforcement in New England, gets more and more compelling.

That is because information about his conduct gets uglier and uglier.

Yet Jones remains absurdly employed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, making almost as much as the \$158,000 he was making in his previous job.

When is NOAA head Jane Lubchenco going to do something about it? And if she doesn't, when are her overseers in Congress going to start making some serious noise about it?

So far, Jones has been protected, while his level of misconduct suggests that his superiors ought to consider prosecution.

The list of particulars against Jones is by now familiar to those with even a casual involvement in the local fishing industry.

Audits by U.S. Department of Commerce Inspector General Todd Zinser found he had presided over wildly disproportionate and vindictive treatment of New England fishermen, extensive misuse of millions of dollars of an asset forfeiture fund, and document shredding while Zinser was actively investigating his department.

NOAA removed Jones from his position last April (although the agency never revealed that until pressured by congressmen), but its officials dismissed any suspicions about the shredding, insisting that the shredding was routine, and had nothing to do with hiding any information from Zinser.

But that's not the case — according to documents recently obtained by the Times.

The "Roll Out Strategy for IG Report on Shredding," prepared by attorney Andrew Winer, NOAA's director of external affairs, includes scripted talking points and responses to questions that might be asked by the media, if the portion of Zinser's report on shredding became public.

So far, it has not.

But it is clear from Winer's hypothetical questions that an employee involved in the shredding twice changed his story regarding his knowledge of it.

Any questions about that were to be met with the response: "We cannot speculate on what conclusions the IG reached during the course of his investigation."

Another possible, and even more troubling question concerned John Oliver, NOAA's deputy assistant administrator for operations and Jones' immediate superior at the time.

Winer wrote that Zinser knew that Oliver was aware of the shredding, but didn't inform any of his superiors about it.

If the press asked whether Oliver had been disciplined or investigated further in any way, the answer was to be: "Due to privacy issues, NOAA cannot comment on any personnel actions."

All of this sounds like something right out of a CIA or Nixon White House textbook for stonewalling. That's been the same tactic Lubchenco took in dealing with fishermen and federal and state lawmakers pressing for change on fish limits — and stood as the NOAA mantra before federal Commerce Secretary Gary Locke stepped more deeply into the NOAA quagmire two weeks ago.

So much for the "most transparent administration in history," one of President Obama's now almost laughable campaign promises.

But Winer's scripted questions certainly suggest there is much more in the IG's report that needs to see the light of day — and in a very public light. As we have noted in the past, nothing screams "corruption" like a good ol' 1970s document shredding party. And Winer's notes clearly suggest that the NOAA shredding effort was indeed not part of a routine effort to clean out the office files, but an acknowledged effort to cover this rogue agency's tracks.

Once again, this is a clear case that cries out for much more than an audit by the inspector general.

It needs a full, independent federal law enforcement investigation.

Congress should demand it — and fishing community constituents everywhere deserve nothing less.