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For immediate release

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Professional Group Exonerates Biologists in Catfight Over Lynx Study

The national furor over charges that several wildlife biologists purposely falsified data in a survey of Canada lynx sent a lot of fur flying, but it may be settling, judging by the just-released findings of a special Board of Inquiry appointed by the President of The Wildlife Society (TWS), the international organization for wildlife professionals. Two of the biologists, employed by federal or state natural resource agencies, are members of the Society.

The National Interagency Canada Lynx Survey (NICLS) was initiated in 1999 to determine the geographic range of the lynx and thereby enhance the furtive cat's future management and protection. Its principal tools are the use of hair collection and DNA testing. Investigations by the U.S. General Accounting Office and U.S. Department of Agriculture confirmed that the biologists had submitted for DNA testing "unauthorized" hair samples but found that no illegal actions had been taken. Some reports alleged that the biologists' motive was to promote an environmentalist agenda on public lands. The biologists maintain they submitted the "control" samples to probe the accuracy of the DNA testing laboratory, although they knew the survey protocol did not have a provision for such action. Hearings on the affair were held in the U.S. Congress and the Washington State legislature.

The uproar called into question the rigorous ethical standards that members of The Wildlife Society are expected to uphold. As a result, TWS President Diana L. Hallett, an official of the Missouri Department of Conservation, in late May established a Board of Inquiry and charged it with determining whether the two TWS members, Tom McCall and Raymond Scharpf, violated the Code of Ethics of TWS. In part, the Code requires each member to subscribe to the highest standards of integrity and conduct, and to support high standards of education, employment, and performance.

In a letter dated 10 July, Hallett informed Society members that the Board of Inquiry had reached its decisions: Both McCall and Scharpf exhibited poor judgment in submitting "control" samples to the DNA lab when they knew that the survey's protocol did not provide for such an

action. However, the Board added that the two biologists' reasoning--to ensure that data resulting from the National Interagency Canada Lynx Survey were accurate and reliable--was consistent with the TWS Code.

The Board also found that neither McCall nor Scharpf acted in a manner suggesting they were trying to conceal the control-sample submission or influence the survey's outcome. Further, the control samples were labeled so as to prevent the lab from concluding that the samples represented actual field data. Poor timing and inadequate communications, the Board concluded, were contributing factors.

Given these conclusions, both biologists have been exonerated of charges of violating The Wildlife Society's Code of Ethics.

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