



## INTERIOR: Watchdog to assess USGS's work with biological collections

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The Interior Department's inspector general has decided to assess the U.S. Geological Survey's handling of biological specimens.

In a Dec. 17 [letter](#), Deputy Inspector General Mary Kendall told the advocacy group **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility** she would investigate its allegations that USGS had "destroyed, lost, or given away" decades of material ([Greenwire](#), June 4).

PEER posted the letter online today. The IG could not be reached for comment.

USGS has had a biology mandate since 1996, when the agency inherited staffers and specimen collections of the National Biological Survey, the Clinton administration's failed attempt to centralize the government's biology expertise. USGS took control of more than 50,000 specimens ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 31).

But Cindy Ramotnik, a retired USGS curator who is the driving force behind PEER's complaint, said USGS has an "anti-biology bias."

PEER attorney Laura Dumais said in a statement, "The U.S. Geological Survey thinks of itself primarily as an earth science agency, assigning its bio-science role to the proverbial 'kid's table.' Unfortunately, this unwarranted upstairs-downstairs science hierarchy within the USGS puts the integrity of our ecological history at risk."

Dumais said she hoped the IG review would corroborate her group's contention that USGS is minimizing its stewardship responsibilities, with a stated [policy](#) prioritizing space and budget over scientific value in choosing what to preserve.

"We hope that the upcoming investigation will include an independent cost-benefit analysis to assess the relative costs of managing all of USGS's collections -- both biological and geological," she said. "While there are costs to all Federal agencies for responsibly managing scientific collections, it doesn't have to break the bank."

USGS declined to comment as the agency was still reviewing the letter posted online by PEER today.

Anne Kinsinger, now associate director for USGS's "ecosystems" mission area, was working for the agency in 1996 but said she never sensed any bias against biology.

"We had pieces from lots of different disciplines coming together; that did lead to some unevenness in our internal policies that we've been working really hard to smooth out," Kinsinger said in an interview earlier this year.

She noted that facilities have closed and retiring staff haven't been replaced due to federal budget cuts, but biology has fared better than most programs.

"They certainly don't stem from a lack of understanding of the value of the collections or a lack of appreciation for biological collections," she said.