

California and the West

56 Geological Survey Scientists Fight Layoffs

■ **Cutbacks:** Appeal says agency conspired to get rid of whistle-blowers and older employees. Two who lost jobs had questioned Ward Valley nuclear waste dump.

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Fifty-six of 500 scientists fired last month by the U.S. Geological Survey as part of wide government cutbacks are appealing their terminations, saying that the USGS illegally conspired to get rid of whistle-blowers, independent-minded staff and older employees.

The appeals to the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, which must hold a hearing within 120 days, come particularly from the agency's sprawling Western regional headquarters in Menlo Park, the largest single earthquake research facility in the nation.

Two of the fired scientists were authors of a controversial 1993 report questioning the placement of a nuclear waste dump at Ward Valley in the Mojave Desert, and one of these, Howard Wilshire, said Tuesday that he believes USGS management was out to get him from that moment.

Overall, Wilshire declared that while "the Menlo Park office had a bad reputation" with national USGS headquarters in Reston, Va., "There's no question that that office was the creative core of the USGS. . . . We were bad boys, but we did the work. They got their revenge." Altogether, 158 of the 750 Menlo Park staff members were fired.

But the USGS official who coordinated the national firings, Bill Cannon, said they did not target whistle-blowers and others. "We have a long tradition in the USGS of scientists differing with their managers," Cannon said. "If we fired all the whistle-blowers, the halls would be pretty empty."

Wilshire retorted: "I can guarantee you they've changed the playing field; there won't be any dissenters now."

Joining in the appeal filed by lawyers in San Francisco and

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Washington is one scientist who was not fired but was demoted—Allan Lindh, a former director of seismology for the Menlo Park office.

Wilshire, at 69, has been with the USGS for 34 years, and colleagues suggest that there was definitely a tendency in the terminations to go after older, senior scientists, those who were best paid. For instance, they said the seven most senior people were fired in the Western minerals branch of the agency.

Mary Dryovage, one of the lawyers filing the appeal, said one of the grounds is to question why the USGS reclassified its scientists' job descriptions before the firings, putting each in a unique job category. She said those who were terminated were then said to have been in positions that were not needed under the new staffing plan.

"They claimed these positions were unique, but then how come managers who had never done the job before could be placed in those jobs?" she asked. The other attorney in the case, Jeff Ruch, noted that of 85 managers in the division affected by the terminations, only one was fired, while more than 20% of their subordinates were.

The reclassifications allowed the USGS to more easily get rid of the employees they didn't like, the attorneys said.