

CAPITOL COMMENTS

National Priorities and Wildlife



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As we enter this post election year, national priorities for resource management are changing rapidly. The election delivered a Republican majority in both the House and the Senate, but not enough to assure the outcome of every issue. Armed conflict in the Middle East, which appears more likely than ever, is having major impacts on the federal deficit, and certainly is affecting domestic programs on natural resources. The Administration is pursuing an aggressive agenda on often controversial domestic issues, and since the election, has proposed a wide array of rulemakings on natural resources that significantly changes the status of federal protection. As potentially momentous events unfold in 2003, the eyes of America and the world will be on the directions and priorities that emerge. It is hard to see that wildlife will emerge as a priority.

Across the country almost all states suddenly have large deficits, leading to program reductions, staff dismissal, and an inability for the states to strongly participate in necessary programs on natural resources. Many state wildlife agencies are limited to existence on license fees and federal aid funding from excise taxes, yet state burdens of working with wildlife and habitats and declining species continue to grow. New fund-

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ing for state wildlife agencies is needed more than ever.

Congress at Work

In the Congress, the House Resources Committee will be lead by Richard Pombo of California, known for his strong support of private property rights and for questioning federal government intervention on farm and ranch lands. Some of his early priorities appear to be revising the Endangered Species Act, seeking a balanced energy supply, ensuring responsible management of lands and forests, and addressing water supply problems, particularly in the West.

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee will be chaired by Pete Dominici of New Mexico, whose priorities include a new domestic energy bill, including more production on federal lands, use of renewable energy, and nuclear energy. Both Chairman Dominici in the Senate and Chairman Pombo in the House will likely include energy development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Environment and Public Works Committee, chaired by James Inhofe of Oklahoma, will probably focus on structural improvements for water projects and surface transportation.

The Administration Steps Out

The Administration has started the year with a large array of agency rulemakings that propose wide changes in management of natural resources. Changes in air and water quality, national forest management, and wetlands protections were recently showcased. Many of these are too complex to discuss in one article, however, and analysis may lead to differing conclusions about their value.

Many wildlife organizations support a careful revision of project review processes to end the gridlock on active forest management, but much more evaluation is needed on how it is achieved. The Boone and Crockett Club and many members of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners are analyzing the agency proposals and will offer opinions and comments on many of them.

Possibly nothing has unified the wildlife and fishery community in the past as has confrontation over the need to protect wetlands. For five decades America vacillated between federal policies that subsidize drainage of wetlands, to programs simultaneously paying land owners to restore those

same wetlands. A major breakthrough occurred in 1990 when President George Bush, Sr. adopted a "no net loss of wetlands" policy. A combination of protective policies and wetland habitat restoration since 1990 resulted in a reduction in the rate of wetland loss in America from over 300,000 acres per year to 10,000 acres per year by the late 1990s. Sportsmen's dollars played a large role in slowing the rate of wetland loss.

In January, the Administration announced possible policy changes that would weaken protection of what are called "isolated wetlands," comprising as much as 20 percent of the existing wetlands. In past analyses, reductions of such magnitude were judged by both government and non-government sources to be likely to lead eventually to significant duck hunting season restrictions in the United States. This is a serious matter of great import to the sporting community in America, and should not be taken lightly.

Action by Congress to Fund Government

Such ambitious agendas require focus—can Congress and the Administration bring them to completion? Few of the appropriations bills for the federal fiscal year that started last October were completed by the 107th Congress, and now the 108th Congress has to deal with resolving budget dilemmas to allow the federal government to keep running—even as it is almost halfway through its fiscal year. At this writing an "omnibus bill" has just passed for all federal appropriations at once, rather than by agency.

The details of the 2003 budget and 2004 proposals will unfold soon. It appears that the Administration remains a strong advocate for well documented programs like National Wildlife Refuges and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. They deserve ours thanks for that support. Congress did not sustain the funding levels for State Wildlife Grants promised by appropriators in lieu of permanent funding, but the program is still alive. A large number of wildlife and agricultural organizations joined in a letter urging appropriators to retain conservation program funds in The Farm Bill.

As important international events unfold, the smaller details of whether our expectations are met for each program will likely be pushed aside. We are likely to have to work hard to keep what we value for wildlife. ■

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