

CAPITOL COMMENTS

A Progress Report



Rollin D. Sparrowe

President
Wildlife Management Institute

Professional Member
Boone and Crockett Club

In many respects the situation in Washington is frozen in time and action—or lack thereof—since the Spring and Summer 2001 *Fair Chase* articles were written. By Independence Day 2001 less than one-third of the appointees necessary to run government agencies had been appointed (and few confirmed), the political dialogue was focused on education reform, health care, campaign spending reform, and funding of national parks rather than addressing wildlife issues directly. The answer to the question posed in the title to the Spring article—will the transition in government serve our interests?—cannot be answered yet.

But there have been some changes. Resignation of one Republican Senator has shifted the whole balance of leadership in the Senate, Democrats have assumed committee chairmanships, and committees have struggled to restructure themselves, swapping majority and minority leadership slots. An energy plan has been released by the Administration, and competing plans have been drawn up by the other side of the isle in the Congress. The “800-pound gorilla” of change is the passage of a tax cut, with a complex array of changes stretched out over a decade. The “gorilla” impact of this tax cut is that the Congress, Administration, and American people are likely soon to have their agendas transformed by a strong shift from government surplus to projected deficits. Aided by a strongly slowed economy, options are suddenly fewer than they were a few months ago.

The fallout for wildlife and natural resource programs through the federal government is yet to be fully comprehended. The President's budget for 2002 proposed to increase funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and to start new incentive programs for land owners, but at the cost of other conservation programs, including the \$50 million for state wildlife programs that was cut. The House and

Senate have largely rejected the reductions in conservation programs, and in many cases (to the dismay of the Administration) have added programs well above the budget levels the Administration supports. These disparate approaches to funding government conservation programs will become more complex when the next set of federal income forecasts come from the Congressional Budget Office.

There are practical concerns about the slow pace of appointments and the time sequence for opportunity to change government direction. Realistically, any administration has two or three years out of the four to substantially influence the budget and most importantly, the direction of programs. With few staff in place, the 2003 budget proposal is being assembled without the benefit of guidance of new minds at several levels in each agency. Losing much of the influence on the first year reduces the window of opportunity to the middle years of a four-year administration, and can seriously reduce an administration's ability to make change.

The Washington Post, in early July, surveyed the rate of appointments in the primary agencies and awarded Secretary Norton a tongue in cheek “Home Alone” award because the halls of Interior remain even more empty than other agencies. One can only sympathize with Secretary Norton given the huge array of resource issues that face her. There still were no Assistant Secretaries for wildlife, parks, or to deal with the energy situation, and no Directors at the Fish and Wildlife Service or Bureau of Land Management. The situation is not much better at the Department of Agriculture. And to add to this dilemma, the shift of power in the Senate appears to be substantially delaying the staffing and confirmation processes. While this is a somewhat gloomy account of progress so far, just a few key appointments can help get things moving.

The Wildlife Partners Network organization, (including two

Club Members) met with new Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth to discuss the status of wildlife and wildlife habitat programs on the national forests, and within the Forest Service. An encouraging discussion ensued about a need for greater visibility for wildlife programs as the Forest Service goes about its business, the value of partnerships and the intent by the Chief to strengthen them, the need to reintroduce proactive management as an integral part of the approach to forest management, and the specific acknowledgment that hunting and fishing are highly important public uses of the national forests. Our organizations also met with high level staff in wildlife, range, and vegetation management concerning programs such as the National Fire Plan, consistent guidelines for inclusion of wildlife in forest plans, and practical ways to help the Service get work done on the ground. In contacts within USDA, there are signs that the new Administration intends to pass decision-making authority back to the Chief and the Agency, with the intent of letting professionals manage the national forests. This is a concept the Club should endorse and take an active role in working with this Administration to ensure that it happens.

The Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA) is still on the front burner in the House. By Independence Day 2001, 235 of 435 House members were in support of passing CARA, widely considered the most significant piece of conservation legislation to come to the Congress in a generation. The overall situation is similar to last year when the House passed CARA early, and the Senate did not support it. It seems likely the House may pass CARA by a substantial margin before the end of this session, if it can rise above the heated dialogues about health care, energy, and others.

As before, the outcome in the Senate is less clear. There is not the focus by some of the leadership that there was last year, partly because of

changes in committee chairmanships of senior members who championed CARA last year. Also, the energy dialogue is focused elsewhere. In the budget cycle, appropriators who opposed CARA last year again propose to fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and have increased from \$50 million to \$100 million for grants to the states. These grants come with strings attached and do not replace the stable funding needed. There appears to be strong conviction among appropriators that state agencies should be required to develop comprehensive plans for habitats and wildlife as a condition of receiving funds.

The single largest issue being missed continues to be the need to fund fish and wildlife programs and staff at the state level on a stable basis, to allow broadening of programs to forestall decline of species, and to complement the strong funding from hunters and anglers which remains the base of state agency support. Neither the Administration nor key members of Congress seem to have received this important message, yet they continue to provide more funding for acquisition while lamenting the high cost of maintaining the lands that we have. There is something obviously missing from this approach.

Property rights advocacy organizations are again vocally opposing CARA, mischaracterizing it as primarily land acquisition, and in some cases attacking its role on behalf of sportsmen. Even the National Rifle Association has come under attack by the same extremists for its support of CARA. Using broadcast fax and mass e-mailing to repeat accusations that are simply not true, they continue to have a disproportionate impact because people do not hold them accountable for what they say. We don't believe everything the public media send us—why would any of us accept these unfounded claims as fact? But many apparently do. Their hysteria has sabotaged candidates for important federal positions, who would have well represented the in-

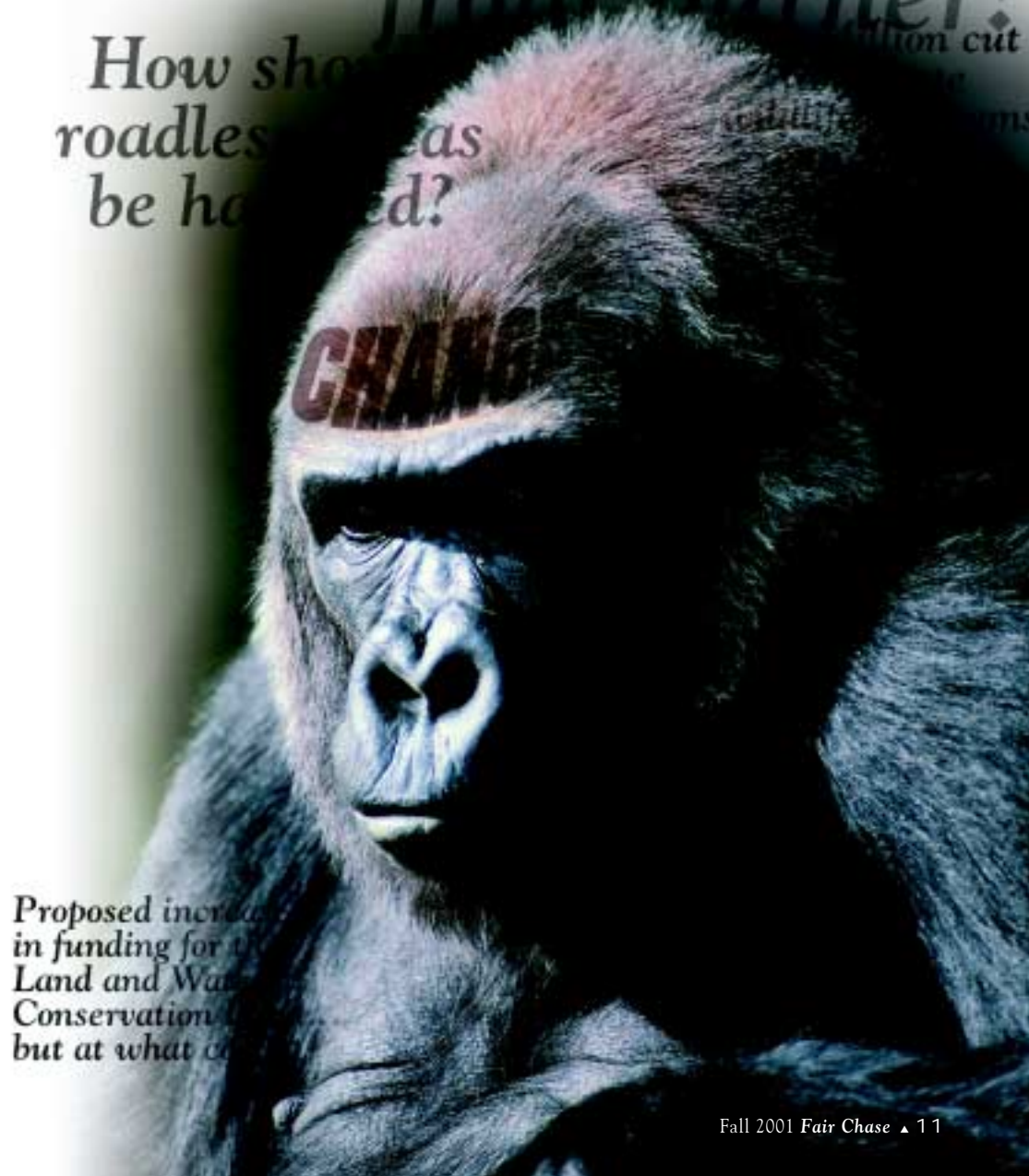
terests of the Boone and Crockett Club. It's time to be clear about this—these attacks are from a fringe element that does not represent the interests of sportsmen and sportswomen in America, are frequently untruthful, and have made no contribution to conservation.

On May 4, the Secretary of Agriculture expressed the Administration's commitment to providing protection of roadless areas in the national forest system. However, acknowledging concerns raised by local communities, tribes, and the states impacted by the Roadless Conservation Rule published January 12, 2001, the Secretary also indicated that USDA

would use a responsible and balanced approach to reexamining the rule to fairly address the questions raised by local people. A 60-day comment period starting in early July posed ten questions to help answer the key question, "How Should Roadless Areas Be Managed?". Resolution of this issue remains important to the future of hunting in

CARA -
Still on the
front burner?
How should
roadless areas
be handled?

Proposed increase
in funding for the
Land and Water
Conservation Fund
but at what cost?



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wild places and is one the Club should weigh in on.

The questions asked are logical questions that refer to the role of local forest planning, how best for the forest service to work with agencies, tribes, and communities, how roadless areas should be managed to best provide for forest health, how to protect communities and homes, access to private property, etc. They acknowledge competing values and beliefs concerning managing public lands and basically open the door for a public response.

The best answer for America’s sportsmen and sportswomen is probably somewhere in between maintaining the rule exactly as it is and rolling it back. Here are some proposals: First, it does not seem reasonable to go back to the drawing board and completely start over, as if no areas were generally accepted as remaining

roadless. In fact most people agree that a very large portion of the 58 million acres designated in the Roadless Rule should indeed remain roadless. A first step should be to find a fair way to take that sizeable area out of the argument. Second, areas that truly should not be included because they hold higher public values should be identified. This is where the legitimate arguments will occur. Third, how management can occur for fire, wildlife, forest health, and other exceptions should be defined through use of carefully defined criteria. Any such decisions should be made with local involvement, and final review by the Chief of the Forest Service.

How resolution can occur after responses to this announcement is important. Many feel a wide-open public comment will simply lead to an unmanageable situation of competing campaigns for extreme views. This long-standing controversy can’t be settled by competing piles of campaign postcards. Some sort of managed stakeholder involvement through a legally constituted committee or committees may emerge as a better option to provide a framework for the Service to proceed.

Road management on the national forests is a complex and contentious issue. The stakes are high for wildlife and hunting, and were outlined in an article in the Summer 1999 *Fair Chase*. Wildlife and hunting will best be served if the battle over roadless areas is resolved, and does not continue to get in the way of dealing with broader and more important issues of managed access to public lands. The answer is neither lockup nor unfettered access. First in importance to sportsmen is the management of a comprehensive road system that has roads only where they need to be, and closes roads where they are not needed. Poorly maintained roads may now exist at a cost to fish, wildlife, and recreational values. Balancing the public interest in access is one of the most difficult issues about forest road management. Equally important are biological aspects of road systems. There is literature and science that guide us for key species, like elk, grizzly bears, and mule deer. Limits on roads are important to those species, so no one would argue that road management should be anything but carefully done to benefit these wildlife. Finally, an issue is the quality of the experience in getting away from civilization through access to wild country. A bottom line for hunters and anglers on this whole roadless area issue, is that wild country is important to us and any management approach needs to take that into account.

Energy and wildlife has been a frequent topic of comment in this

column. The scorecard currently shows approximately 40 Congressional Hearings in the past several months on the topic of energy, with little if any attention to wildlife. After a slow start the Administration is talking about “conservation” as a part of a national energy strategy, but they mean conserving the use of fuels. Nowhere in all these hearings has there been a focus on the direct impacts of ongoing energy developments on wildlife, let alone the kind of increases in activity expected through current proposals.

Taking the Wyoming example, a situation with 10,000 or so active wells is projected now, through coal bed methane development, to add 30,000 to 50,000 wells in the next decade. Yet, no Congressional inquiry has occurred on the impact of that activity on wildlife and fish. The key committee chairs are proposing removal of “needless bureaucratic delays” that exist in restrictions on exploration and development in current fields—those are seasonal and other restrictions designed to help wildlife that nest or winter on the areas under development. Without a dialogue about what this means, how can any legislator responsibly call for such removal? This is a question that the Club should ask along with others interested in the future of big game resources in key areas in the Northern Rockies and elsewhere. The time to ask those questions is now, not later after decisions to proceed with relaxed rules have been made. Would that be allowed on private lands?

The pace of government remains slow, and the attention to issues that meet our needs are uneven at best. So far the Administration has not shown much interest in our newly organized Wildlife Conservation Partners, or its recommendations for land and wildlife policy. As some of the holes are filled in agencies and directions become clearer on big ticket items like energy, we will then know more about whether this governmental transition will serve our needs. ▲▲▲