

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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Are Wildlife Protections Just an Impediment

Each year we follow the program and fiscal fortunes of the public land management and wildlife agencies closely, and for good reason. The Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and state wildlife agencies are an important basis for managing the wildlife we value and for providing frameworks within which we enjoy wildlife. Challenges to sustaining this foundation persist.

Enough has been said about the current cost of government, the war on terrorism, Iraq, etc. The citizens of our country appear to worry mostly about the economy; the Administration about terrorism and security; and Congress about what the opposing party is doing. In this strange climate, Congress and many in the Administration seem to blame wildlife, excessive regulations, and litigation by extremists for everything from inadequate supplies of natural gas to the weak economy. Wildlife protections on public lands – even the status of public use – are seen as “impediments” to other national needs.

We, as Boone and Crockett Club Members, and acting through other organizations, object to polarization in the public policy arena, seemingly frivolous litigation, and inability for resource agencies to conduct management. We are committed to reducing “gridlock” in management of national forests. We rail against federal imposition of control over wildlife. We are so strongly vocal that perhaps we need to step back and think about it.

Congress and the Administration are reviewing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in order to “streamline” it. NEPA is a federal statute that simply

requires public disclosure of environmental impacts of major federal actions. Lawsuits brought under NEPA, which have reprogrammed so many wildlife and natural resource issues, are based on procedural failures. Usually an agency did not meet its responsibilities to fully evaluate the implications of its proposed action or failed to monitor the effects as promised. Frequently, these failures are tied to fiscal realities – Congress and the Administration just didn’t appropriate money so monitoring and other tasks didn’t get done. Challenging agency decisions on these inadequacies has become an “art form” by organizations that want to prevent agency action and stop projects rather than achieve disclosure. This needs to be fixed. But do we really want to return to a process where cutting timber, constructing a road, filling a wetland or stopping a river flow can be approved using only economic objectives? Do we want public disclosure to be swept away? Wildlife needs a reasonable NEPA.

Consider the energy push for America. We know that all forms of energy will have to be carefully developed to meet human needs. An aggressive focus on wildlife protection and public land use categories as “impediments” to oil and natural gas development is underway in Congress and the Administration. After reports by Departments of Energy, Interior, and Agriculture stating that the majority of public lands can be accessed for development, new task forces are looking at the issue. Apparently previous evaluations found the “wrong answers” for industry, Congress, and the Administration. Wildlife organizations have asked for a seat at the table, but they don’t yet have a presence in this debate. That 30-inch buck mule deer in Wyoming shouldn’t be an “impediment” to America, but that’s the way it is being treated.

A recent Wall Street Journal article discussed a direct role by a senior Administration staff in charting policy by resource management agencies in Klamath River water issues in Oregon. In an emotionally charged arena involving such complex social issues as effects of the Endangered Species Act, in which implementation affected farmlands stemming back to federal land programs more than 100 years old, politics dictated outcomes. When the previous Vice President reportedly called Forest Supervisors to dictate forest management, we were outraged. How should we

react to this kind of control over professional managers?

Once each decade, the Administration combines logical questions of cost and the role of government with some raw attempts to cut the federal workforce. In the past Administration, agencies like the Natural Resource Conservation Service and Forest Service lost thousands of staff members without regard to agency effectiveness. Recently, the National Park Service has been evaluated by the Department of the Interior (DOI) for providing jobs to the private sector. The Department of Defense is well underway in its apparent intent to contract out wildlife work. This is of great concern because a committed, professionally trained workforce has been the backbone of conservation progress in the U.S. Most agency supporters are willing to consider certain operational functions as non-federal, but carrying out governmental decision-making processes (actually managing programs and forests, ranges, and wildlife) are professional roles for the agencies and should stay in government.

In an outsourcing twist, the DOI embraced contracting management of some or all of the National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) to Native American tribes. The National Bison Range NWR in Montana, a refuge the Boone and Crockett Club helped to establish, is under consideration. The question is which refuge functions must remain “inherently governmental.” For refuge supporters, the issues are clear. This is not an issue of race or economic need for Native Americans. It is a duly established and paid-for refuge that belongs to the American people. Its management is with the public trust responsibilities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Professionally managing this and other refuges is an “inherently federal function,” and any precedent set at the Bison Range will affect other refuges, National Parks, and other federal lands. Hunter and angler groups will hold the DOI to its promise of more openness in consideration of any changes at the Bison Range. The stakes are high!

The Boone and Crockett Club, and sportsmen and sportswomen in America, cannot retreat from supporting professional management of wildlife. We need to be careful what we ask for in seeking “streamlining” and “less government.” We have experience in restoring wildlife. As we reach out to our friends in Congress and the Administration in an election year, we need a weighing and balancing of who is doing what for whom. ■

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