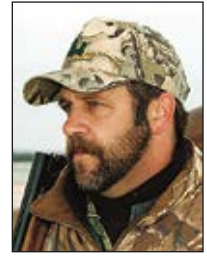


APPROPRIATION HIJINKS

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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With upcoming congressional and presidential elections, political games are playing out in both legislative chambers. The nation is torn by violent incidents and orchestrated riots for and against those who serve and protect our citizens. Britain has left the European Union, and the global economic fall-out is still uncertain. Terror in the Middle East and at home continues. Both parties have established their platforms, the conventions are through, and chaos continues to ensue.

The political gamesmanship in any year is always startling; however, this election year they are beyond the pale. The current appropriation bill sitting in the House Appropriations Committee that would establish funding for the Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been weighed down by 131 proposed amendments. The amendment process can be used to assure that members of Congress address the needs and desires of their constituencies. Congress has a history of weeding through amendments to craft appropriations.

The fact that very few of these amendments will actually pass doesn't diminish the fact that they are a waste of time, energy, and expense.

However, this go-round is particularly disturbing in its blatant attempt by members to send political signals to the voters. The amendments run from the ridiculous to the sublime. The reader can decide for himself/herself whether sponsors are serious about governing or just playing to the base of their political party. I understand this is an appropriations bill, and funding or defunding a program sends a signal about policy, but I contend that these policy decisions should be considered separately and deliberatively. Amending an appropriation bill with arcane provisions to achieve a political or policy objective does not constitute good government. Let us look at some of the 131 amendments.

The EPA has some powerful enemies in the House. Numerous amendments in one way or another reduce funding for the agency and/or preclude the EPA from administering rules. One amendment would eliminate funding for EPA's Criminal Enforcement Division. I have no doubt that there are issues that need attention in that division, but eliminating criminal enforcement is beyond my comprehension. A number of amendments keep EPA from implementing programs such as (a) a draft EPA/U.S. Geological Survey report about protecting aquatic life from hydrologic alteration, (b) total maximum daily load goals for states surrounding the Chesapeake Bay, and (c) portions of the Clean Air Act. Three amendments provide a choice for Congress to value human life. Three separate amendments state that EPA could

promulgate and enforce rules that save the lives of either more than (a) 1,000, (b) 2,500, or (c) 5,000 people over the course of two years despite any other amendment that would preclude the rules—a decision that would constitute a weird sort of human life auction. One amendment would preclude employees of EPA to travel on official business by airplane. I don't think this amendment is intended to reduce carbon emissions.

The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) also would be curtailed if amendments pass the House. One prohibits funds to be spent on prohibiting tubing, wake boarding, and waterskiing on a portion of Lake Havasu. Endangered species, always a hot-button issue, would be affected by a number of amendments: (a) preventing protection for listed species that have not undergone a five-year review, (b) preventing the listing of two species of meadow-jumping mice, (c) prohibiting protection of the gray wolf in the Lower 48 states after June 2017, and (d) eliminating protection of Mexican wolves in the southwest. In a snub to the FWS and the judicial system, an amendment would prohibit the use of funds to enforce a federal court decision that stopped implementation of a plan to manage double-breasted cormorants. Two infrastructure-related amendments would prohibit using funds to destroy buildings or structures on Midway Island in the Pacific Ocean and prohibit funds to be used to prevent the building of an 11-mile road through Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

Two amendments address the display or non-display of Confederate flags in units of the NPS. Finally, one amendment would prohibit "the use of funds for the purpose of printing signs, manuals, policies, directives, instructions or guidance of any kind that encourages or accommodates in any way the use of any gender-specific facility by a person whose birth certificate identifies such person as being from a different gender." How these issues address the conservation of our nation's natural resources escapes me.

Using amendments to an appropriation bill allows the sponsor to raise his/her support or objection to a policy issue. I don't suggest that amendments to an appropriation bill are unnecessary or illegitimate. However, there is plenty of time to prioritize, discuss, and make informed decisions during the course of a legislative session. Instead, we get polemics that don't serve the public well and constrain the management of natural resources. The fact that very few of these amendments will actually pass doesn't diminish the fact that they are a waste of time, energy, and expense. Our nation doesn't have time for these shenanigans. ■