

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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Transition Musings

More than a million people braved freezing temperatures on the National Mall to witness the inauguration of President Barack Obama. The country was full of hope and anticipation of change. Executive Orders and proclamations to address ethics, the

economy, and the war on terror followed shortly after the ceremony. Most of these acts focused on a new approach to doing business in Washington and the world. However, conservationists were left to wonder how this new administration will handle issues that are closest to our hearts—the management of the nation’s public and private land upon which fish, wildlife, hunters, and anglers depend.

I hope that some of the management philosophy and actions associated with former President Bush survive the transition between administrations. First, the cooperative conservation approach. This approach, although not entirely original (the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had delivered cooperative conservation for decades), changed the manner in which federal natural resource management agencies dealt with millions of landowners and conservationists across the country. It promoted the idea that conservation was best accomplished by developing public/private partnerships and incentives were an essential element. Although Congress never fully met the President’s budget requests to reprogram agency funding, the philosophy was firmly instilled in most federal natural resource agency employees.

Second, the relationship between the federal government and state fish and wildlife agencies improved over the course of the last administration. This transition occurred because both parties recognized the considerable expertise and commitment that they could amass by working together. From this experience, trust and respect grew and the working relationship flourished. The improved relationship with

state agencies occurred concurrently with opening communication channels between the federal government and hunters and anglers. The formation of the Sporting Conservation Council (SCC), a federal advisory committee, institutionalized these communication channels. Previous *Fair Chase* issues have described the work of the SCC, which led to the White House Conference on North American Wildlife Policy and the 10-year action plan which provides direction to federal agencies. This plan and attendant SCC white papers provide a strong foundation to bridge to the Obama administration.

Although significant, these actions did not address all the concerns of American hunters and anglers. Therefore, the leadership of the incoming administration has challenges to confront. The appoint-

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ments and confirmations of Secretaries Ken Salazar for Interior and Tom Vilsack for Agriculture appeared to be sound decisions based on their respective skills and experience. They will need qualified and competent staff to assist them in addressing these challenges. We should closely monitor the dozens of other political appointees who will walk the halls of the Departments of Interior and Agriculture. Appointments of staff with state fish and wildlife agency experience would send a positive message about the administration’s commitment to state government, its responsibilities, and its authorities.

From a conservationist’s viewpoint, we should focus on the administration’s decisions regarding federal and state agency funding, energy development, wetland protection, public land management, climate change, and administration of the Endangered Species Act. Each of these major issues needs additional attention and improvement. I will explore some of these issues in greater detail in future columns, but I would like to focus on the top priority and greatest challenge facing conservation today—funding for federal and state agencies.

In the current economic crisis, it will be difficult to make a successful case for increased conservation funding because of competition with other important national issues. In fact, I believe that the economic crisis and the federal government’s reaction will pose a significant threat to advancing the conservation agenda. The financial impact on federal natural resource agencies will exacerbate years of program budget reductions and restrictions. The economic crisis also affects states at a time when state fish and wildlife agencies’ budgets are also curtailed even though their legal mandates and responsibilities have broadened. Numerous states have slashed budgets across the board regardless of the source of funds. State agencies are and will be faced with their own economic crises which have a direct impact on license fees, staffing, program delivery, and service to the public.

At this time, speculation or conclusions about the administration’s commitment to conservation is unproductive. In time, appointments, policy, and funding will tell the story. The Obama transition team’s early outreach efforts to conservation organizations have been positive, sincere and appreciated. I remain cautiously optimistic about our future. Now, if we could only muster the nation’s 40-50 million hunters and anglers on the National Mall— wouldn’t that impress the TV commentators, the public, and the world? ■