

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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Transition Musings Part Two

In the last issue, I discussed some of the new administration's early actions regarding appointments to key, federal wildlife conservation agencies. Congress recently confirmed additional presidential appointees to fill out the still-thin ranks of political

appointees at both the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. Increased scrutiny of resumes, financial reports, and the congressional "holds" on nominations has made the business of transitioning from one administration to another difficult and time-consuming. Career employees at these departments live in a strange sort of bureaucratic limbo trying to do what is right for the resources and guessing at the incoming administration's political agenda.

Some issues are crystal clear. The Obama administration has reversed the Bush administration's previous decision to limit the need for agency consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with respect to federal projects that may impact threatened or endangered species. The rejection of the rule signals a more hands-on and protective approach to endangered species issues than intended by the previous administration. This decision eliminates some of the head scratching and hand wringing that has occurred since the earlier decision. Although there was certain logic to transferring some of the biological decision-making process to other agencies which would reduce the tremendous consultation workload of the Fish and Wildlife Service, there was an undercurrent of suspicion with this eleventh-hour decision which would have undoubtedly teed up numerous lawsuits. If the original regulatory proposal has merit, the Obama administration and public has ample time to revisit this proposal.

Most state and federal wildlife biologists and conservation organizations applauded the Obama administration's

continued support of the previous administration's decision to delist gray wolves in the Great Lakes region and a portion of the Rocky Mountains (namely Montana and Idaho). The administration's support was based on the fact that wolf populations have far exceeded biological recovery goals and all but one state in the regions have developed satisfactory management plans that allow population control in a manner that assures long-term sustainability of wolves. Political observers might have been surprised that the new administration would side with a decision made prior to the transition. This decision was not met with the unanimous support. Organizations which may have assumed that the new administration would repeal or roll back the wolf decision have already drawn battle lines to

energy development offers a more immediate challenge to public and private land management. The new administration has made no secret of its desire to continue and expand upon the Bush legacy of meeting the nation's energy needs by developing domestic energy sources. A few decisions to withdraw leases here and there have not lessened the concern among many wildlife conservationists that the push for more non-renewable and renewable energy sources will have an impact on fish and wildlife habitat if not managed correctly. Visions of extensive wind and solar farms scattered across the nation's public lands and the transmission facilities and lines needed to move that power from remote areas to urban centers coupled with continued development of oil, gas, and coal reserves

have many of us wondering if the sustained, multiple-use doctrine of public lands has been lost somewhere along our path to energy independence. Conservation and preservation groups are anxiously awaiting new energy legislation and advocating for concurrent funding to conserve fish and wildlife resources that inhabit lands devoted almost entirely to energy development and transmission.

The jury is still out on the Obama administration's approach to fish and wildlife conservation. There are signs of empathy and signs of potential disregard for the very resources that stir our passions. The newcomers to Washington have made numerous advances to fishing and hunting groups. They appear to listen and consider our concerns. We have entered into an important dialogue, one that attempts

to build on our work of the last few years. How the Obama administration approaches the long-term conservation challenges laid out by the Boone and Crockett Club and numerous other conservation organizations has yet to be seen. We are stronger because of the partnerships we have formed with other organizations and the issues we have committed to paper. We will need your help to deliver upon promises made and promises to come.

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Although much of the discussion in Washington relates to legislation on climate change and funding to adapt to new climate patterns, I would propose that