

# CAPITOL COMMENTS



Steven Williams, Ph.D.  
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER  
Boone and Crockett Club

PRESIDENT  
Wildlife Management  
Institute

## What Will Change Bring?

The recent November elections have left Washington in a state of uncertainty. Pundits predict how the change of power in the House of Representatives will affect our nation.

Politicians posture and put their best spin on the election results.

The call for

partisanship will be in vogue for a few months. However, no one really knows how this will all play out. One thing is clear: the change in power reflects the nation's collective concern about our economy, unemployment, healthcare reform, and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among all the debate about what caused a major shift in the makeup of the House and Senate and how this shift will affect our nation, little was discussed about the impact on fish and wildlife conservation.

One conservation issue that may have played a role in, and will be affected by, the election results is climate change. Opponents of climate change legislation that included cap and trade of carbon credits successfully convinced voters that the "energy tax" would further harm the economy. The outcome is that climate and energy bills will undoubtedly be uncoupled, leaving our response to climate change hanging in limbo. Whether productive discourse will establish a national energy policy that is effective and accepted is still a big question. The fallout of all this is that the momentum for carbon emissions reduction, climate change adaptation funding, and energy conservation has been somewhat diminished. Fish and wildlife resources, with no voice in the debate, will have to weather the impacts of a warmer and drier climate without substantial funding for resource management agencies to monitor and adapt to climate change impacts. A national energy policy that includes expanded energy development,

both renewable and nonrenewable, will have a direct bearing on fish and wildlife habitat. Whether that impact will be detrimental or inconsequential depends on the ability to avoid, minimize, and mitigate the inevitable destruction of habitat.

Another victim of state of the nation and the shift in political power will be federal land management agencies. Land management agencies will find the new players in Washington more suspicious of any regulatory proposals that impact the economy or energy development. New House committee chairmen have already signaled their intent to change business as usual for the agencies

try innovative practices, and the president's signature conservation legacy initiative, America's Great Outdoors, will be directed down a more difficult road.

The November election impacts will also be felt by state fish and wildlife agencies. Governor's mansions in at least 13 states (at the time of this writing) will see new occupants from a different political party. In some of those states, the leadership of fish and wildlife agencies will be asked to resign or will be forced out. The fact that conservation leadership could be affected in one quarter of the states is breathtaking. In all the states with new political leadership, state

agencies will have to learn the new priorities, policies, and programs that come with a new administration. This takes valuable time and resources that will be diverted from on-the-ground resource management. It is a given that reduced state agency budgets and staffing will continue into the foreseeable future—as long as we experience difficult economic times. To top it off, state agencies will also have to deal with the change in federal leadership for that state. I suspect that fish and wildlife conservation will become even more difficult given the new lineup of political leaders that head to Washington, D.C., and our state capitols.

When the cheering stopped in the victors' ballrooms on November 2, 2010, the stark reality of putting our nation's economy and our citizens back to work must have settled in. I am concerned that among all the deliberations to accomplish those critical national goals, fish and wildlife conservation will take an even further back seat than it normally does. We are facing difficult times, but conservation organizations, state fish and wildlife agencies, and hunting and shooting industry representatives are collaborating in more ways than ever to sustain our nation's conservation and hunting heritage (more about that later). Suffice it to say, we all will need to do yeomen's work. ■

**In all the states with new political leadership, state agencies will have to learn the new priorities, policies, and programs that come with a new administration. This takes valuable time and resources that will be diverted from on-the-ground resource management.**

under their oversight. With Republicans in charge of the people's House and Democrats in charge of the White House, the departments of Interior and Agriculture will spend considerable time preparing for and engaging in oversight hearings on Capitol Hill. This time-honored tradition of bringing secretaries and bureau directors into the woodshed has been played out whenever there is a political split between the executive and legislative branches. Having survived oversight hearings when only one party was in power, I can tell you that these federal employees will spend at least the next two years living in purgatory, if not worse. The impact to conservation will be manifold: agency budgets will be more intently scrutinized and reduced, federal land acquisition efforts will be held up by a less federal land-friendly House of Representatives, federal agencies will be less likely to