

Cutting a Wide Swath on Public Land

Republicans Using Budget to Achieve Broad Philosophical Goals

9/19/98
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Republicans today begin making budget decisions that will have a profound impact on how Washington manages the country's forests, range lands and waterways, nurtures its fish and wildlife, and exploits its energy resources.

Just as Democrats in past years used the budget process to force their views on GOP administrations—banning offshore oil drilling, for example—so, too, are the Republicans who now control Congress using the budget to achieve broad philosophical goals they might be unable to reach through the regular legislative process.

By the time this week is over, the petroleum, wood products, mining and other industries and the tens of thousands of workers who depend on using federal resources will be reaping the rewards of the 1994 elections.

A conference committee and other panels will consider whether:

- The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of the world's finest examples of a pristine arctic ecosystem, will be opened to oil and gas drilling.
- The administration will be prevented from administering the 1973 Endangered Species Act pending a thorough congressional rewrite of that controversial law.
- To short-circuit a comprehensive scientific study of the Columbia River basin and northern Rocky Mountains region out of concern that its findings would hobble the livestock, mining and timber industries.
- The U.S. Forest Service will be directed to dramatically increase commercial timber cutting in the nation's largest forest, the 17-million acre Tongass in Alaska, a step environmentalists say ignores concerns for wildlife.

Other votes could reverse Congress's decision last year to give millions of acres of California desert protection under the National Park

Service, sell off part of the massive Central Valley Project irrigation system in California, auction to the private sector the dams and hydroelectric facilities of the Southeast Power Administration, and insulate the licensing of the resulting privatized operations from nearly every major environmental law enacted in the last quarter century.

Provisions in a House bill would also blunt long-standing drives to im-

pose higher fees and tougher environmental standards for mining and grazing operations on federal land.

Those and literally dozens of other policy decisions that will be incorporated into the 1996 appropriations

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bill covering the Interior Department and related agencies and into the reconciliation legislation, which sets long-term budget policy, will collectively represent a truncated national debate on what kind of a steward Washington should be of the hundreds of millions of acres of land and other public resources it controls.

The central goals of the GOP majority on natural resource issues, said Daniel Val Kish, chief of staff on the House Resources Committee chaired by Rep. Don Young (R-Alas-

ka), are to give people in western states more control over decisions previously made only in Washington, and to make public lands more economically productive. "We want to promote some kind of economic foundation in the rural, public land West," Kish said.

A prime example is the plan to open the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas drilling, a venture so opposed by the Clinton administration that the White House is considering a preemptive strike making the region a national monument to prevent drilling and protect the caribou and other wildlife there.

If Congress were to send Clinton separate legislation opening up the refuge to petroleum production, the president would almost certainly veto it, and it probably would be sustained. But tucked into a massive budget reconciliation package, the drilling provision is more likely to survive.

The appropriations process also offers Congress an opportunity to intervene deep inside the executive bureaucracy and profoundly affect how policy is carried out.

Both the House and Senate versions of the Interior appropriations bill would severely restrict the impact of a massive scientific study of the entire region drained by the Columbia River system that otherwise could have broad implications for federal land management in eastern Oregon, eastern Washington, Idaho and Montana.

The Interior Columbia River Basin Ecoregion Assessment Project being conducted by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management is designed as a comprehensive scientific study of an entire ecosystem beset by forest health problems and by endangered species conflicts involving everything from salmon to woodland caribou. The

study was intended to provide the scientific basis for managing in concert numerous national forests and BLM districts that are now run in relative isolation, with a goal of avoiding the head-on crash that occurred in the Pacific Northwest with the northern spotted owl.

But Congress seems determined to curtail the study and its impacts, as well as interim federal fish protection strategies that the BLM and Forest Service have implemented pending completion of the scientific reviews.

The House spending bill stops the Environmental Impact Statement process in its tracks, directs management of national forests on an individual rather than collective basis, and limits the ability of wildlife agencies to intervene in timber cutting and other activities to protect endangered species. The Senate version is less far-reaching, but would still block region-wide management based on the scientific study and limit endangered species interventions by other federal agencies.

Jack Ward Thomas, the chief of the U.S. Forest Service who lived through the spotted owl crisis and saw government's options narrow as time passed, says such an approach seems shortsighted.

"The longer you wait, usually the less flexibility you have," he said. "We are now obviously in a crisis situation in the Columbia basin. . . . We just can't delay looking at this, because things aren't going to get better; they are going to get worse."
