

Lewiston Tribune, Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2007 – Turnabout by Sandra Mitchell (2 pages)

Turnabout:

On new wilderness, ignore public?

Jim Fisher suggests in his Aug. 13 Tribune editorial that the wishes of the citizens of Custer and Lemhi counties don't really count when it comes to the Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act (CIEDRA), aka the Boulder-White Clouds wilderness bill. Jim suggests that Congressman Mike Simpson should ignore the research that found 83 percent of the people in those two counties oppose CIEDRA.

Our polling was the most comprehensive ever done on CIEDRA and its 319,000 acres of new wildernesses. A sample of 400 people in a two-county area was taken on July 31 and Aug. 1. The combined population of Custer and Lemhi counties is about 12,000. Most statewide studies, including the one touted by the Idaho Conservation League, sample 400-500 individuals to determine the attitudes of 1.4 million.

We shared our data with the congressional delegation, the governor's office, the media and others. Even media outlets that reviewed the material had to grudgingly admit that the data was solid.

We focused our efforts on Custer and Lemhi counties because Congressman Simpson has boasted that CIEDRA enjoys strong local support. Looking at the results of the poll, that simply isn't true. The vast majority of citizens who live, work and play in the area, the people who have the most to gain or lose from CIEDRA, don't like the bill.

There are many things that one can say about CIEDRA, but one thing that can't be said any longer is that the fine people of Custer and Lemhi counties support it.

The fact that Jim Fisher supports a wilderness bill is no surprise. However, Jim has also been a vociferous critic of any proposal to sell federally owned lands. CIEDRA doesn't sell these public lands; it gives them away. Where is the outrage?

Jim has been around the legislative process long enough to know that there are no guarantees that the promises of cash in the bill will ever happen. All you have to do is look at the recently designated Steens Wilderness in Oregon to get a dose of reality. When the Steens act passed in 2000, it contained a promise of \$25 million in cash to buy out inholders and for implementation. Not a single dime has been appropriated to date, but the 174,000 acre Steens Wilderness is now a permanent fixture of southeastern Oregon.

Jim's suggestion that the Idaho Recreation Council (IRC) is some tiny, insignificant part of Idaho's population is just wishful thinking on his part. Idaho has over 250,000 licensed motorized recreation vehicles and thousands of mountain bikes that are used by tens of thousand of our members across the state. Every region in Idaho has a substantial, organized motorized or mechanized recreation group that is part of IRC. Our member's recreation activities generate millions of dollars annually throughout the state.

It is appropriate that Idahoans debate every piece of legislation that impacts them, whether they do it as an individual or as a part of a group. It is the hope of IRC's membership that elected officials will pay attention to the wave of opposition staring them in the face. You might also be interested to know that according to Scotty Phillips in a recent editorial that appeared in the Challis Messenger, "CIEDRA has strong opposition from 47 conservation groups nationally, 15 of which are from Idaho."

The research shows that the people of Custer and Lemhi counties are fed up with the federal government, wilderness and CIEDRA. If the numbers had shown 50 percent or 60 percent opposition to CIEDRA, there might be an issue of divided support, but an overwhelming 83 percent said they opposed the bill; 70 percent of them strongly opposed it.

The only way this bill can become law is if Congressman Simpson completely ignores the wishes of the people most affected by it, the citizens of Custer and Lemhi counties.

Mitchell, of Boise, is public lands director of the Idaho State Snowmobile Association, a member of the Idaho Recreation Council.