

Government secrecy, not a wolf, is at the door

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One of the best ideas ever to come from Idaho was the state's public records law.

It presumes you have access to government records. Access keeps the process honest.

The system is constantly under assault. In the two decades since the law took effect, legislators have tweaked it here, trimmed it there.

Now, they're trying to pull from public view the name of anybody who purchased a hunting or fishing license or game tag.

That's because an opponent of the state's wolf hunt, Rob Hobson of Boise, posted names of those who shot a wolf this season on his Web site. Some hunters say they have been harassed.

Among the sponsors are Sen. Gary Schroeder, R-Moscow.

Idaho Fish and Game issues up to a half-million hunting and fishing licenses a year.

Last year, it sold 25,744 wolf tags to Idaho residents and 684 tags to non-residents.

Upon formal request, Fish and Game will release those names - but without addresses or any other details. Of course, in the Google era, filling in the gaps in information is just a matter of time.

Whatever the pitfalls, keeping those records open to the public serves a purpose. Wolves - indeed all of Idaho's wildlife - are a public resource. How that resource is managed is always subject to public debate.

But how are the opponents of Idaho's wolf hunting season going to assure themselves that the agency's quotas aren't exceeded?

Likewise, those who think hunting wolves is prudent can ascertain the predators are actually being thinned out.

And hunters can see for themselves that ordinary people are actually involved.

Hide that information under a blanket of confidentiality, and all you have is Fish and Game's word that it's doing an adequate job.

At the same time, some wolf hunters have been far from shy. The first Idahoan to bag a wolf, Robert Millage of Kamiah, announced that fact on the Web. Last week, Milt and Kay Turley of Avery were only too happy to have their quest for a wolf presented on the front page of the Spokesman-Review.

Open records are no invitation to intimidate and harass these hunters. There are laws against such deeds. Nonetheless, anyone with the forbearance and cunning to hunt one of nature's toughest creatures isn't apt to shrink away from a fight.

Yes, the Internet is a source of mischief. But if Hobson's choice is allowed to seal off access to these records, what's next? Do you redact the public's right to know what it's paying public employees and contractors simply because a right-wing activist has decided to put every worker's salary on the Web?

How long before Idaho follows events in neighboring Washington - where threatened publication of the people who signed Referendum 71 brought an injunction against releasing those public records - and shuts off access to the names of people who sign petitions placing initiatives or candidates on the election ballot?

Whether a person votes, drives a car, is a member of a licensed profession, owns property or owes back property taxes is a matter of public record in this state. You can't pick and choose. Eliminate this access for one today and the background check on potential candidates is sealed off tomorrow. Little by little, the light within government halls becomes dimmer.

What's ironic is the people sponsoring this latest bill all want accountability in government. And several of the supporters - among them Reps. Lenore Barrett, R-Challis, and Judy Boyle, R-Midvale, - often express a healthy distrust of bureaucrats.

If ordinary people can't get public records, who do they think will be left in charge? - M.T.