

Cry of the wild

Marty Trillhaase /Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to U.S. Reps. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., Raul Labrador and Mike Simpson, both R-Idaho. The Sportsmen's Heritage Act of 2012 may be just sloppily drafted. Or the measure - which all three Republicans joined in passing Tuesday by a 274-146 vote - might deliberately expose the nation's wilderness lands to all-terrain vehicles, off-road traffic, motor boats and aircraft, as well as road-building, logging and mining.

Ostensibly, it's about preserving the rights of hunters, anglers and recreationists - and putting endangered Democrats, such as Montana Sen. Jon Tester, on the wrong side of a National Rifle Association priority.

The Wilderness Society is worried the bill seems to elevate rights of motorized recreationists, loggers and miners ahead of the wilderness values. If it were just the environmentalists saying so, you might dismiss it.

The neutral Congressional Research Service told U.S. Rep. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., the bill is just vague enough that it "would appear to obviate the primacy of the Wilderness Act purposes, meaning wilderness values would apply only to the extent that they did not conflict with other land management statutes."

Since the measure also short-circuits the National Environmental Policy Act, the public's hands may be tied if wilderness protections start evaporating.

If that's not their intent, then why were McMorris Rodgers, Labrador and Simpson among 244 of their colleagues - mostly Republicans - who shot down Heinrich's amendment to specify the law would not open wilderness areas to motorized traffic or commercial activity?

JEERS ... to Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna. Tuesday, Luna wrapped up a statewide tour in Moscow where he promoted the overhaul package he strong-armed through the 2011 Legislature. He continued to drive this point: Critics who say his plan to equip students with laptops and require them to take online classes are wrong; the plan does not replace live teachers with technology.

Now where would anybody get that idea?

Could it be from Luna's first draft?

Luna proposed paying for his overhaul by making Idaho classrooms bigger in the fourth through 12th grades. He wanted to balloon the student-teacher ratio about 10 percent - from 18.2 to 19.8 - during five years. Do that, Luna told the Legislature's budget-writing

committee on Jan. 18, 2011, and "we will need about 770 fewer positions in FY 2012 and FY 2013. These can be absorbed through attrition."

After slicing 770 jobs in years one and two, Luna would expand teaching ranks in years three, four and five, so that the "net loss of teaching positions is estimated to be around 320 in total."

Or did we get that notion from Luna's Plan B? Rather than cutting teaching jobs, he'd pay for his technology program by siphoning money out of the account used to pay teacher salaries? First he pulled 1.67 percent, or \$14.8 million. By 2015, the hit would rise to 6.5 percent or \$57 million.

With less money, local districts could either shrink staff levels, staff salaries or turn to taxpayers to make up the difference.

Or was it the fact that lawmakers recognized the teacher-for-technology trade-off and essentially repealed that provision this year? Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, shepherded a bill that says LunaTech will get its money like any other program - by chasing after whatever new dollars the state tax system yields each year. But it won't come at the expense of teacher payrolls.

If Luna wasn't misrepresenting his record in Moscow, he sure was spinning it.

CHEERS ... to Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire. Without Gregoire's involvement, no grand bargain to patch Washington's budget would have passed last week - and lawmakers would have been scrambling around Olympia today.

With the 30-day special session closing in on its final week, both sides were at an impasse.

Republicans insisted upon a package of reforms that would block gimmicks, such as kicking deficits into the next fiscal cycle, insisting on more transparency about how teacher health insurance policies are negotiated and less generous pensions for state workers who retire early.

Democrats wanted to protect social programs, eliminate a tax break for large banks and invest \$1 billion in a public works package.

But they were hardly talking to each other after March 2, when three conservative Senate Democrats - Tim Sheldon of Potlatch, Jim Kastama of Puyallup and Rodney Tom of Bellevue - broke ranks and handed power in the Senate over to the GOP. The House remained ruled by Democrats.

On April 9, with about a day to go before the special session's deadline lapsed, Gregoire delivered the deal. She had already devised an accounting maneuver, delivering an extra

\$238 million to balance the budget. To that, she added reforms for the GOP and a jobs plan for the Democrats.

That got the talks moving.

Then she finessed a 2 a.m. meltdown that might have sent the whole package crashing.

Six hours later, a bleary-eyed Legislature adjourned for the year.

CHEERS ... to state Rep. Shirley Ringo, D-Moscow. She not only flunked the Idaho Freedom Foundation's "legislative freedom index," but Ringo got the lowest score of any of Idaho's 105 lawmakers - a negative-125.

Most of north central Idaho's lawmakers didn't fare much better. For example, Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, got a minus-111. The region's highest score came from Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood, who got a 46.

The Freedom Foundation advocates constant legal warfare with the national government, undermining public services and making certain tax laws coddle the comfortable. Topping its scorecard were the ethically challenged Sen. Monty Pearce, R- New Plymouth, who got a plus-65, and Rep. Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, who got an absolutely stratospheric 117.

That's no agenda for ordinary Idahoans. - M.T.