

Voting yes

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

CCHEERS ... to Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. Beneath Labrador's Tea Party shell, it turns out, there's a pragmatic core.

Wednesday, you would have expected Labrador to oppose the farm bill. After all, he had voted against an earlier version in June - which proposed to cut food stamp benefits by \$4 billion a year. At the time, opponents wanted deeper cuts.

The latest version trimmed food stamps by a mere \$800 million a year.

Joined by like-minded hard-liners such as Reps. Justin A. Amash, R-Mich., Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., Louie Gohmert and Steve Stockman, both R-Texas, Labrador has left his thumb on the no button.

Even if it meant shutting down the federal government and defaulting on the national debt, he voted no.

Even if it threatened to stop federal timber payments or Payment in Lieu of Taxes to rural Idaho, he voted no.

But this time, Labrador voted for a farm bill that preserves Idaho's \$26 million in PILT funds, including \$1.5 million for Idaho County and \$628,000 for Clearwater County.

This time, Labrador voted for a farm bill that timber interests sought because it scales back the Environmental Protection Agency's authority to impose requirements on logging roads.

This time, Labrador broke with Amash, Bachmann, Gohmert and Stockman and joined mainstream Republicans, including Mike Simpson of Idaho and Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington.

And this time, Labrador walked away from the conservative Club For Growth, which instructed him to vote no.

None of this was easy for Labrador, but he put his constituents first.

Makes you curious how Idaho Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch will vote on the farm bill, doesn't it?

JEERS ... to Rep. Lynn Luker. R-Boise. He wants to stop seven Idaho cities from safeguarding citizens from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Those seven cities - including Moscow, Coeur d'Alene and Boise - acted because Idaho's lawmakers refuse to

provide protection to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people under the state Human Rights Act.

Using religion as a shield, Luke has sponsored two bills:

- One would block the state from lifting a license against any professional who defended his actions on the basis of a sincerely held religious belief. So a school counselor who preaches fundamentalist doctrine to a gay student in the course of her work might be fired, but not lose her license.
- Another would permit discrimination in the private market place by amending Idaho's 2000 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. An employer could cite his sincerely held religious belief in firing a gay worker.

Luker's law may be aimed at homosexuals, but it goes much further.

Take the scenario of an acolyte of Aryan Nations leader Richard Butler. He has a sincerely held religious belief in his right to discriminate against African-Americans and Jews.

And if someone brought a complaint against this Aryan Nations foot soldier, he could turn around and file a lawsuit, alleging his own sincerely held religious beliefs had been violated.

Welcome to Idaho. Just set your clocks back 50 years.

CHEERS ... to Washington Rep. Susan Fagan, R-Pullman. Earlier this month, she joined about 15 House Republicans in crossing party lines by voting for the Democratic-supported DREAM Act.

That measure would allow young people residing in the Evergreen State - illegally brought to the U.S. by their parents and through no fault of their own - to apply for State Need Grants.

Because members of the GOP oppose the DREAM Act, its prospects in the state Senate are dim. So the safe vote for Fagan was to join her seat mate, Joe Schmick of Colfax, in voting against it.

But in a state that already educates all children through high school and where the economy depends on an educated workforce, the DREAM Act makes sense.

"It just feels right to me to offer them the opportunity to apply," Fagan told the Moscow-Pullman Daily News' Bill McKee.

CHEERS ... to Idaho House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley. Last week, the speaker proposed eliminating the grocery sales tax break for middle class Idaho families in order to generate about \$80 million in tax relief for corporations and higher-income individuals.

Bedke thought lowering the top rates would make Idaho more attractive to new businesses.

The story took a different twist, however, when Bedke sought out his best-informed critic. Mike Ferguson, former chief economist under six Idaho governors and director of the Idaho Center for Fiscal Policy, has argued Idaho's mania for tax cuts has done little to stop the state's slide toward poverty while putting schools on a starvation diet.

Bedke listened and dropped the idea.

"The one thing that drives me is the mantra: First, do no harm," Bedke told the Twin Falls Times-News' Kimberlee Kruesi.

That's more than you can say for the Idaho Chamber Alliance. The affiliation of chambers of commerce wants to lower income tax rates by about 5 percent during the next five years - which won't mean all that much to individuals but the \$120 million loss will continue to undermine public education support.

JEERS to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. Last week, the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey pored over Otter's latest campaign report. Among the \$686,000 haul for the last six months was \$60,000 from Nevada gaming interests:

- Casino operators Steve Wynn, Wynn's wife Andrea, Frank Fertitta III and Lorenzo Fertitta each wrote Otter a \$10,000 check - the most Idaho's law permits them to contribute.
- Wynn Resorts and Station Casinos also gave the limit.

Otter's on record opposing online gaming in Idaho. But he's outraising GOP challenger Russ Fulcher by nearly 3-to-1. Does he need money this badly? - M.T.