

Dousing the candles on wilderness birthday cake

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The U.S. Forest Service could not have done a better job blowing out the candles on the National Wilderness Act's 50th birthday cake if it had tried.

Rather than focusing on this uniquely American endeavor - no other nation on Earth has preserved portions of the natural world untouched by civilization - it has decided to reinforce every possible negative wilderness stereotype:

- Wilderness is elitist. It favors the trust fund baby who can afford to hire an outfitter to haul his fat butt across the Frank Church wilderness over working-class Idahoans who have to walk in.
- Wilderness areas are treated as a private preserve by an unelected federal bureaucracy or judiciary.
- There's something secretive about lands the public never sees or learns about.

Fueling those impressions is a Forest Service directive that - until it blew up last week - was on its way toward transforming the agency into the arbiter of news coverage in those areas. Anything that was not breaking news, an interim rule four years in the making said, was commercial photography or filmmaking in nature and therefore subject to permits.

And the Forest Service could decide whether to grant or deny those permits depending on whether the applicant intended to promote "the use and enjoyment of wilderness or its ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic or historic values."

Ambiguous enough for you? Essentially, it would put the Potter Stewart - "I know it when I see it" - rule in effect.

The district ranger's office in Challis would welcome Idaho Public Television crews to the backcountry.

Meanwhile, another ranger in Kamiah would call public television a commercial enterprise and say no.

Or say a news crew wanted to film the professional hunter/trapper Idaho's Fish and Game Department sent into the Middle Fork of the Salmon River to kill wolves. Would the regional Forest Service office at Ogden, Utah, say that falls outside the realm of promoting "the use and enjoyment of wilderness or its ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic or historic values" and back away from a controversial subject?

Likewise, a team of journalists intends to delve into the debate about whether to expand the Fish Lake Airstrip. Wilderness Watch and Friends of the Clearwater intend to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service about the airstrip expansion plans. As a defendant in that

case, would the regional office at Missoula, Mont., decide coverage of the airstrip debate is inconvenient?

And what about the ordinary photographer who has his tripod and camera set up for a sunset at Alice Lake in the Sawtooth Wilderness? What does he tell a young ranger who has shown up demanding to see his permit?

Until Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell intervened last week, Forest Service spokesmen either declined to elaborate or tripped over their explanations of how they had managed to get crossways with the First Amendment.

Tidwell pulled the plug on news-gathering restrictions of any sort while maintaining control over commercial filmmaking activities. Good for him. But it still gives you pause.

For one thing, the troubling interim rule remains on the books.

For another, the whole dust-up comes four years after the issue was supposedly settled. Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and the state's congressional delegation protested to Tidwell's office when Idaho Public TV faced an obstructionist Forest Service.

The Caribou-Targhee National Forest recently refused to allow an Idaho Public TV producer to film on national forest land outside a wilderness area.

Tidwell won't hold his job forever. He'll leave behind a younger generation of staffers who drafted this idea.

Even if Tidwell has the last word, where does this leave the efforts of groups such as the Clearwater Basin Collaborative? As part of a comprehensive compromise, the CBC has proposed 300,000 acres of new wilderness.

Already, U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and John Barrasso, R-Wyo., have warned Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack that "if wilderness becomes a place defined by excessive regulation and agency power, Congress will think twice before designating future wilderness areas."

The Forest Service's tone-deafness has handed wilderness opponents new ammunition.

Don't be surprised when they use

it. - M.T.