

THE CARLSON CHRONICLE

When a Win Is Really a Loss

Those singing the praises of the recently passed and signed legislation creating a modest new wilderness area in the high mountain regions of the Boulder/White Clouds are trying to sell a “Pig in the Poke.” They want to put a “Happy Face” on a bad bill that only rewards one side of the multiple use/special use lobby: the motorized crowd, the ATV’ers, dirt bikers and snowmobilers led by Lewiston’s Sandra Mithell.

Some of us are cursed with long memories. In particular, I can recall that time in the late 80’s when Senator James A. McClure, and Governor Cecil D. Andrus, worked long and hard to come up with a once and for all time Idaho wilderness bill that included protection in the Boulder/White Clouds for more than 300,000 acres.

The late Mary Kelly was then head of the relatively new Idaho Conservation League. She, along with Craig Gehrke of the Wilderness Society, and other Idaho conservation leaders, denounced the Andrus/McClure proposal for among other reasons not protecting enough acreage in the Boulder/White Clouds. How ironic.

This current bill, put together with Mitchell’s help by the crafty Senator James Risch, and identical to the bill passed by the House, reduced the acreage in the original CIEDRA bill from author/sponsor Second District Congressman Mike Simpson----from just over 300,000 acres to 275,000 acres to be protected by the wilderness designation. In 2010 the number actually was up to 332,000 acres.

Such a deal. That this bill is now being praised as better than nothing and the right culmination of a forty year endeavor by folks such as ICL’s current executive director, Rick Johnson, and my old boss, Governor Andrus, does not warm my heart.

It’s pretty clear that the gang of three, the Risch-Crapo-Otter alliance of “not one more acre in wilderness,” knew they had won the chess match by calling the ICL/Andrus/Obama bluff of creating a larger National Monument using the Antiquities Act. First, they had Rick Johnson’s testimony in which

Johnson pledged not to pursue the National Monument designation if Rep. Simpson had a bill before the President within six months.

Secondly, despite an on the record pledge by a top White House aide, John Podesta, that the president would invoke the Antiquities Act if there was no bill to sign within six months, it didn't take much digging in the Interior Department to recognize that the folks responsible for producing the backup paperwork necessary for an Antiquities Act designation were working on other "candidates" and no one had been directed to work on a monument declaration for the White Clouds.

Rick Johnson, guessing that Senator Risch had figured out the probability was high that the Obama Administration could leave the ICL and Andrus "high and dry and hornswoggled," could argue that the lemonade out of the lemon was any bill that gave he and the ICL some face-saving wilderness.

It is telling to look at who is and who is not standing behind the president for the traditional bill signing ceremony. Rick Johnson is there, Rep. Simpson is there, Gary O'Malley, the former Weyerhaeuser executive who is retired and represents the Sawtooth Society, was there, as was the former mayor of Stanley.

Neither U.S. Senator, Mike Crapo or Jim Risch, nor First District Congressman Raul Labrador, nor Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter, was present. The White House also invited Governor Andrus to attend, but, citing other earlier commitments, even Andrus declined to be there.

One disappointed observer who hoped for more said "It's not like the Administration moved the goal posts on proponents. They never even set up the goal posts."

Supposedly the Administration felt there was not enough local support for the Monument option, and many folks within Idaho were uneasy about uncertainty surrounding the regulations governing a monument which would only become known AFTER a designation. The fact of the matter though is the Administration never gave the ICL and wilderness proponents the opportunity to show their support by way of turnout at public hearings.

When folks like Interior Secretary Sally Jewel, Under Secretary Robert Bonnie and White House aide John Podesta started saying Simpson had six

months to get a bill one could guess Simpson would come up with something less than his original proposal but would allow him to declare victory and move on. In this writer's book the Second District Congressman is the only player coming out of this charade relatively unscathed.

Bottom line is a national monument declaration would have been far and away the best for the resource and the best for Idaho's future. Some will say this view is a classic case of letting the perfect be the enemy of the good, and maybe they are correct. However, many know in their hearts the current bill is nothing to celebrate.