

Otter's signal to Fish and Game is clear enough

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter is fooling nobody with his ploy to oust two Fish and Game commissioners - except possibly himself.

Last week, the governor announced that he was accepting applications for the seats now held by Fish and Game Commission Chairman Mark Doerr of Kimberly and Vice-Chairman Will Naillon of Challis. Their terms end June 30.

Of course, Doerr and Naillon are welcome to reapply, Otter's office said. If they choose not to reapply, Doerr and Naillon will help select their replacements.

Usually when a governor ousts a Fish and Game commissioner after one term, he simply appoints someone else.

It happens rarely and usually reflects on the individual commissioner. For instance, former Gov. Dirk Kempthorne gave Commissioner Roy Moulton of Driggs the boot in 2003 after Moulton hosted a Montana trapper who shot a coyote without a license or permit.

Not only have Doerr and Naillon been exemplary members of the commission, but they've had the governor's support - until now. In his 10th year in office, Otter apparently has embraced a radical change in the management of Idaho's wildlife.

As the Tribune's Eric Barker reports, Otter's conversion coincides with the desire of rural legislators to overrun the state's egalitarian wildlife management system, established by the voters' initiative of 1938.

Fish and Game Commission members have resisted:

- Enabling well-heeled hunters to pay extra for improving their drawing odds for controlled hunts.
- Giving landowners the ability to sell hunting tags - therefore creating an incentive for large, private hunting preserves.
- Selling some of Idaho's most prized controlled elk, deer and pronghorn hunts to the highest bidder.

For good reason: The bulk of Idaho's hunters know they'd be priced out.

"In all three cases, a majority made it clear to us they were opposed and we acted accordingly," the commission wrote last year.

Nonetheless, lawmakers continue to insist. A bill directing the commission to expand auction tags - cosponsored by Senate Resources and Environment Committee Chairman Steve Bair, R-

Blackfoot, and House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star - emerged last winter, but was not pursued.

Now comes Otter's unmistakable message to the remaining commission members: Get in line or suffer the fate of Doerr and Naillon.

Why is this a surprise?

Otter's former State Tax Commission chairman, Royce Chigbrow, was caught helping his friends, betraying taxpayer secrets and improperly managing tax payments.

His former transportation director, Pam Lowe, collected a \$750,000 wrongful termination check after she alleged Otter's allies targeted her for not extending contracts to politically connected companies.

Otter's best friend and former administration director Mike Gwartney so blatantly steered the massive school broadband project to influential companies that the Idaho Supreme Court used the word "corrupt" to describe it and voided the contract.

The governor's former chief of staff was a lobbyist for a private prison company that was driven out of Idaho after it admitted billing the state for guards who didn't work their shifts - and even then, the state's investigation was botched.

Rather than save the taxpayers money by relying on Attorney General Lawrence Wasden's office, Otter turned to his former staff attorney, Tom Perry, to challenge the federal government's sage grouse recovery plan. As of last winter, Otter had paid Perry's private law firm \$142,000 for two months work on the case.

This is a governor who looks after his friends and rewards privilege. Why would he stop now?

The last time something like this happened was 1995, when then-Gov. Phil Batt asked the Fish and Game Commission to step down. After hunting and fishing enthusiasts stormed the state Capitol, Batt backed off.

Batt had none of Otter's baggage and he operated in a different era. The country's undergoing a wave of revulsion at the way privileged people have been moved to the front of the line. That's fueled Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign on the left and Donald Trump's on the right.

Can you imagine the kinds of militant protests that could be headed in this governor's direction?
- M.T.