

Pistol still holstered, Otter shoots from the hip

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Idaho Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter can lose his bid for a second term.

All that's required is for the Republican incumbent to make mistakes.

Just like the error he committed last month.

On the eve of a Senate hearing on Congressman Mike Simpson's Boulder-White Cloud wilderness bill, Otter announced his strong opposition to it. The governor has never liked wilderness, but he remained silent when Sen. Mike Crapo passed a bill preserving southwest Idaho's Owyhee Canyonlands.

Not now.

This time, the governor was strident, provoking Sen. Jim Risch to back away from the Simpson bill. Without Risch, the bill may be doomed.

With it goes 10 years of building ground-level support among ranchers, conservationists and local government leaders behind a bill to protect a crown jewel of central Idaho.

With it goes the notion of collaboratively crafting Idaho answers to long-standing natural resource disputes. Simpson's approach was the template to this process. If it fails here, who will follow its lead next time?

With it goes the idea of Idahoans charting their own course. Left in place is federal management that treats the entire area as wilderness - the 332,000 acres Simpson wanted protected as well as the 130,000 acres his bill would have released to multiple use. Also looming is the possibility of a presidential decree creating a much larger national monument in the Boulder-White Clouds, imposing more mandates and restrictions than anyone from Idaho would contemplate.

While he was scorching Simpson, Otter also singed himself. The governor reminded people of some things he'd rather they forget.

Consider his tin ear on resource issues. Whether it's running afoul of wetlands regulations on his own Star ranch or as an Idaho congressman co-sponsoring a bill to sell off public lands to pay for Hurricane Katrina relief, Otter's narrow ideology is out of step with mainstream Idahoans. This is a state where the broadest coalition ever assembled - conservationists on the left to the Farm Bureau on the right - wanted to use state tax dollars to maintain open spaces. It's a place where Ada County residents willingly paid property taxes to preserve their foothills. In Idaho, Simpson's Boulder-White Clouds bill was more popular than the governor. Pollster Bob Moore found it had 59 percent support. Only 30 percent opposed.

Consider Otter's ineffective legislative record. He's good at stopping bills. Passing legislation? Not so much. First he alienated the Legislature. Then he lost control of the Idaho GOP. Now he's undermined the signature legislation of his former seat mate in Congress.

No, the Boulder-White Clouds is not the game-changer in 2010 that it was in 1970, when it helped Democrat Cecil Andrus oust Republican Gov. Don Samuelson. But it does feed an unflattering narrative at a time when Otter has less margin for error than he should.

Privately, some Republicans will acknowledge they are anxious. They see the public mood souring. Last month, the right track-wrong track question turned negative in Idaho. That means political winds may be blowing against incumbents of all stripes rather than just the federal government or even the Democratic Party.

Otter's still ahead of Democratic challenger Keith Allred. But his support is eroding. Should the trend continue, Allred's camp says, the race could be tied in September.

In ruby red-Idaho, that sounds like a stretch. But throughout the year, Allred has raised more money than the incumbent. There's been a trickle of respected moderate Republicans - starting with former state Sen. Laird Noh, R-Kimberly - joining the Allred campaign.

None of this changes the contours of the race. It's Otter's to lose. Allred still has to make the compelling case to voters and the days are ticking away.

For Otter, however, pulling the props out from under a bill that was popular with the political center was a self-inflicted wound. Not a big one, but not the first one, either. At some point, these wounds add up. - M.T.