

Changing his tune

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. He's the last person in Idaho who ought to be complaining about how challenges to the state's salvage logging plans trimmed revenues for the public education endowment fund.

At issue is an operation on 167 acres of state land located about 25 miles east of Kooskia. To access those trees, the state wanted to build a road across property owned by Morgan and Olga Wright. But the couple didn't want all that disruption and possible erosion. A conservation easement attached to that property protected their rights.

Along with Idaho Rivers United, the Wrights sued the U.S. Forest Service for not requiring the state to get a special use permit. U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill agreed and granted an injunction.

So instead of trucking out the logs, the Idaho Land Board Tuesday resorted to helicopter logging. The state will make money - about \$500,000 - but not the \$2 million it envisioned.

"It's disappointing," Otter told Keith Ridler of the Associated Press. "A million and a half bucks in a classroom - you can do an awful lot with it."

What a crock!

Is this the same governor who paid a Boise law firm \$1 million to defend his administration's botched Idaho Education Network contract?

Or the governor who insisted on waging his own legal campaign to derail same-sex marriage - which at last count involved more than \$150,000 in legal fees?

This is Butch Otter, isn't it? He's the governor who played games with former Chief Economist Michael Ferguson's revenue projection to cut school spending more deeply than necessary.

Wasn't it Otter who promoted tax cuts rather than restoring what schools had lost?

And didn't this governor preside over a Legislature that has socked away half of its \$108 million surplus in savings accounts while spending the other half on road projects - instead of advancing education? Even with this year's appropriation, public schools remain \$60 million behind where they stood on the eve of the Great Recession.

Otter didn't protest then. But when he has the chance to take a shot at environmentalists and the federal courts, it's amazing what will come out of his mouth.

JEERS ... to Seattle City Council President Tim Burgess. He thinks it would be a swell idea to subject law-abiding citizens to a \$25 "sin tax" for every firearm they purchase and 5 cents for each bullet.

"Taxpayers in Seattle pay for millions of dollars in emergency medical care every year for people who have been shot," Burgess said. "It's time for the gun industry to chip in to defray those costs."

Does he sound over-caffeinated to you?

Applied to products such as cigarettes and liquor, sin taxes are supposed to discourage people from unhealthy behavior.

Gun ownership is not unhealthy. You want to stop gun violence? Keep guns away from the mentally ill, criminals and children. Impose universal background checks. Require more training. Restrict where people can carry guns.

But levying a sin tax on people who are responsibly exercising their Second Amendment rights? What's next? A "sin tax" for politically incorrect free speech?

Even gun control advocates think it's foolish.

"The idea that someone can afford a gun and not a \$25 tax so therefore they're not going to buy a gun doesn't make sense to me," said Allison Anderman, staff attorney for the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

What it will do, however, is drive firearms customers out of Seattle - and give the rabid guns rights crowd another huge public relations boost.

CCHEERS ... Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg. He's at work on a bill to protect the civil rights of Idaho's gay community.

For 10 years, Republican lawmakers have blocked bills to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. So it's legal to fire someone for being gay. The state allows landlords to evict a lesbian couple. And in Idaho, businesses are allowed to refuse service to transgender people.

About the only progress that's been made has been at the local level, where 10 cities - including Lewiston, Moscow and Coeur d'Alene - have passed their own anti-discrimination ordinances. At the Statehouse, the GOP leadership this year agreed to hold hearings on an "add the words" bill. But on a party-line vote, the House State Affairs Committee refused to go beyond that point.

So a measure from the Senate's top officer would be a step forward. Unfortunately, Hill says he is following Utah's model, which protects employment and housing rights, but not public accommodations.

"I don't think that a business should deny service to a person because of their sexual orientation," Hill told National Public Radio's Jessica Robinson. "However, I think that businesses should have a right not to participate in events that promote something that's contrary to their religious belief."

Hill also would pass a separate law rather than amend Idaho's Human Rights Act.

Does that sound like second-class citizenship to you?

JEERS ... to U.S. Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo, both R-Idaho. They're willing to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Last week, the Senate approved Tennessee Sen. - and former Education Secretary - Lamar Alexander's measure to scrap the punitive No Child Left Behind Act.

In its place, Alexander has threaded the needle - preserving testing requirements for students in grades three through eight and once in high school - but giving local school districts far more latitude. NCLB was notorious for imposing steadily increasing penalties against schools that failed to make "adequate yearly progress" toward achieving near-universal proficiency.

The measure sailed through the Senate on an 81-17 vote. Among those voting yes were Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, both D-Wash.

Only the fringe - such as Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., on the left, and Ted Cruz, R-Texas, on the right - opposed it.

Even Risch and Crapo said it was a good bill.

"It was a good effort, but it is not enough," Risch said. "I am anxious to vote someday for a bill that does the job in the future."

So Crapo and Risch got the best of both worlds. The country will get a better education law. But they aren't blamed for anything that goes wrong. Talk about playing it safe. - M.T.