

Is Otter making Sayer's end run around public?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Blackfoot Republican Steve Bair is serving his fifth term in the Idaho Senate.

He's chairman of the Resources and Environment Committee.

And on that panel sit some of Idaho's more conservative Republicans - Jeff Siddoway of Terreton, Lee Heider of Twin Falls, Sheryl Nuxoll of Cottonwood, Clifford Bayer and Marv Hagedorn, both of Meridian.

Is it any wonder Bair had the air of a self-confident power broker last year while he was emailing back and forth with Wild Sheep Foundation Chairman - and Premier Technology co-founder - Doug Sayer of Pocatello?

Sayer was co-author of a 2010 bill suggesting the Idaho Fish and Game Commission auction off a dozen of Idaho's choicest hunting opportunities to the highest bidders. Mindful of Idaho's 1938 initiative-inspired egalitarian approach to wildlife management, Fish and Game declined.

So Sayer and Bair hatched a plan to compel Fish and Game to engage in the auctions.

With House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, as his co-sponsor, Bair went before his own committee on Feb. 2 with Senate Bill 1236.

To say what happened next surprised Bair would be an understatement.

Apparently mindful of public opposition to Bair's approach, his own committee shrugged it off. In fact, had he not been chairman, the panel might not have extended him the courtesy of at least agreeing to introduce it.

"I introduced the ... (auction) tag bill to my committee yesterday to get it printed," Bair wrote to Sayer in a Feb. 2 email, "and it nearly died. The committee spent considerable time expounding on how the Legislature should not be making decisions like this for the commission, and for not letting the commission decide themselves whether to let one tag, 12 tags or no tags out for auction. After the discussion, there was a long, pregnant silence. Finally, one reluctant member said, 'Out of deference to Chairman Bair, I will make the motion to have (it) printed.' No one would second it until another member also voiced pity on the chairman. So we got it printed, but it won't get out of committee without a lot of arm twisting."

Continued Bair: "I was shocked. My committee has several new members over the last couple of years, and I thought they would be supportive. Not so, evidently."

As the Tribune's Eric Barker reported, we learned this because the Idaho Wildlife Federation obtained, under Idaho's Public Records Law, copies of emails surrounding the auction tag bill and the subsequent firing of two Fish and Game Commission members, Mark Doerr of Kimberly and Will Naillon of Challis.

Look over Sayer's March 16 email to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's chief of staff, David Hensley, and you're left with the impression that Sayer shifted to a Plan B - pressuring the Fish and Game Commission to do what the Legislature will not.

"I fear that if we aren't willing to change the chemistry of the existing commission and perhaps the leadership of the department, this issue will not heal or repair itself," Sayer wrote in a reference to Doerr, Naillon and Director Virgil Moore. Sayer recommended "that we do not reappoint Mark Doerr or Will Naillon when their term expires. ... It is a difficult and severe problem, but when faced with

something like this, one also needs to look at the top of the organization and wonder if that individual is part of the problem. In this case, I believe Virgil and especially his deputy director are in fact promoting the culture that we now experience."

There's no email showing Hensley's reply - and the governor's office dodged Barker's question about whether Otter supports the auction tag scheme. But the governor did choose not to reappoint Doerr and Naillon - as Sayer suggested - telling the two commissioners they were free to reapply.

Sayer would not be the first prominent corporate official to hold sway over the governor's office - whether that involves the operating of prisons, broadband services in the high schools, transportation contracts and policies, or special favors for the friends of Otter's former State Tax Commission chairman.

Who's to say whether Otter will remove additional appointees from the Fish and Game Commission or even hold any fee increase hostage to win the commission's support for an auction tag program?

A smoking gun, this is not.

There is, however, more than just a little smoke. - M.T.