

E-mails Reveal Back-room Arm-twisting at Idaho Fish & Game Commission



Opponents Axed Volunteer Commissioners, Targeted Agency Heads

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For Immediate Release October 17, 2016

BOISE — Recently unveiled emails confirm what Idaho sportsmen had suspected: That Gov. Butch Otter bowed to political pressure to axe two members of Idaho’s Fish and Game Commission, who ran afoul of a Legislator’s desire to revamp the way Idaho distributes its most prized hunting licenses.

“Idahoans enjoy a world-class wildlife resource thanks to our independent Fish & Game Commission,” said Kahle Becker of the Idaho Wildlife Federation. “The strong-arm politics we have unveiled are a direct threat to Idaho sportsmen and the hunting heritage we have built over decades.”

Recently unveiled emails clearly show that Blackfoot businessman Doug Sayer and Sen. Steve Bair, R-Blackfoot, used their political influence to draw cross-hairs on the Commissioners who objected to their goals. Sayer is an influential member of the Idaho Republican Party; Bair is chairman of the Senate Natural Resources Committee. Sayer also tried, but failed, to bring down the Director and Deputy Director at the Idaho Department of Fish & Game.

At issue is the lottery system that Idaho uses to distribute highly prized and limited hunting permits, such as moose, bighorn sheep and mountain goat. Historically, these permits have been distributed in annual lotteries. But some Legislators have pushed to carve out more and more tags to be sold to the highest bidder, which has been controversial.

“Idaho’s Fish and Game Commission is a proven success because it guarantees sportsmen’s have a voice even in times of intense political pressure,” said Brian Brooks, of Idaho Wildlife Federation. “Idaho outdoor families won’t stand politicians playing heavy-handed politics with public servants and professional biologists.”

The standoff between Legislators and the Commission grew heated in May of 2016, when Gov. Otter failed to reappoint two commissioners, Mark Doerr and Will Naillon.

But months earlier, Sayer was emailing the Governor’s Office, calling for heads to roll.

“I fear that if we aren’t willing to change the chemistry of the existing commission and perhaps the leadership at the department, this issue will not heal or repair itself,” he wrote to Butch Otter’s Chief of Staff

David Hensley....”I must however recommend to you that we do not reappoint Mark Doerr or Will Naillon when their term expires in June.”

Gov. Otter failed to reappoint Doerr and Naillon, offering no explanation for the move. The Idaho Wildlife Federation sought those emails under Idaho’s sunshine law and reviewed hundreds of pages to shed light on the actions, which were provided to the Idaho press this morning.

The Idaho Fish & Game Commission was created by a statewide vote in 1938.

The emails reveal that:

1. Sayer asked the governor’s office to axe Commissioners Doerr and Naillon and suggested he had names to recommend as replacements.
2. Sayer recommended firing the director and chief deputy of the Idaho Department of Fish & Game as well. (They remain in office, as the commission has authority over their employment.)
3. Sen. Steve Bair organized large agriculture special interests to testify at hearings, to drive a wedge between the Idaho Department of Fish& Game and rank-and-file sportsmen.
4. Bair and Sayer coordinated political strong-arm tactics to withhold necessary funding increases for the Idaho Department of Fish & Game to gain political leverage for their pet project: selling more big game tags to the highest bidder.

“Clearly, there are many creative ways to fund wildlife conservation in Idaho,” said Brooks. “We have a system that works and is fair for all Idahoans, but allowing politics to trump the public interest and professional biologists is a recipe for disaster. The Idaho Wildlife Federation – and other outdoor groups – clearly need to double our guard to prevent that from happening.”

A link to highlighted emails can be [viewed be clicking here.](#)

Download the zip file containing all emails can be [by clicking here.](#)

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