

A POLITICAL TURN IN THE ROCKIES?

By Paul Tolme

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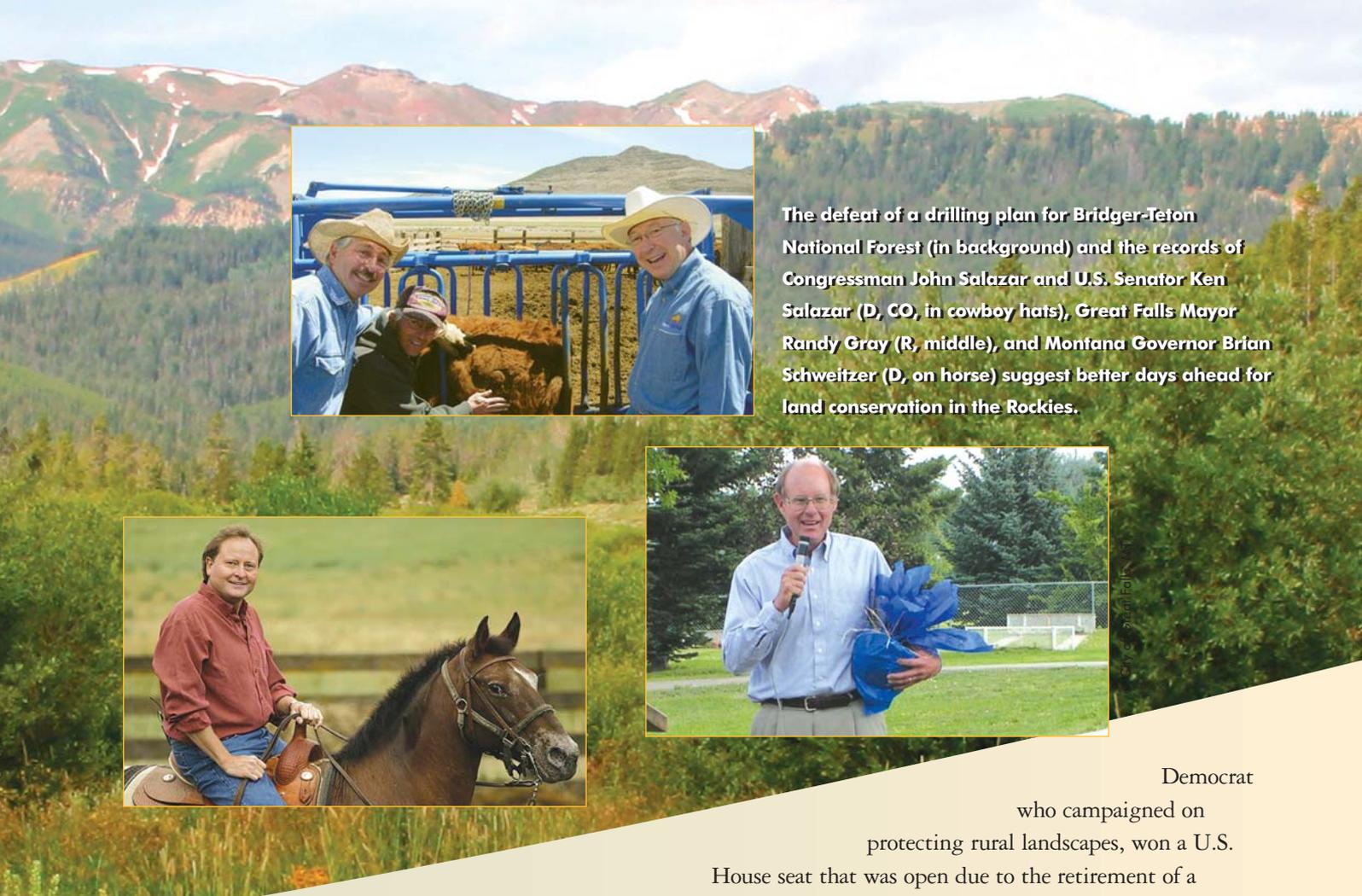
Alan Lackey of Raton, New Mexico, is a hunter and rancher—and a lifelong Republican. But in 2002 he broke with his party and voted for Bill Richardson for governor because of the Democrat’s conservation policies. Scarring the landscape for “a few quick bucks,” says Lackey, “is like burning down the house to stay warm for one night.”

The Rockies provided President Bush with some of his most lopsided margins in 2004, and many of the region’s members of Congress are among the most hostile to land conservation. But there are signs that voters are starting to pay more attention to environmental issues, and the region’s politics may be shifting.

One reason is that Westerners are seeing up-close the damage to water, air, land, and wildlife caused by the Bush administration’s “drill, drill, drill” energy policy, says League of Conservation Voters Political Director Tony Massaro. And they don’t like it.

Last year, the Bush administration issued more than 6,000 permits to drill oil and gas wells, triple the number of a decade ago. All told, more than 35 million acres of public land—most of it in the Rockies—have been leased to oil and gas companies. As pipelines and well pads spread, ranchers find themselves unable to run cattle. Hunters and fishermen are alarmed by the loss of fish and wildlife habitat. Homeowners hear the roar of compressor stations and see gas flares instead of stars.

To capitalize on this industrial land grab, the LCV has launched a major campaign to persuade disenchanted



The defeat of a drilling plan for Bridger-Teton National Forest (in background) and the records of Congressman John Salazar and U.S. Senator Ken Salazar (D, CO, in cowboy hats), Great Falls Mayor Randy Gray (R, middle), and Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer (D, on horse) suggest better days ahead for land conservation in the Rockies.



Democrat

who campaigned on protecting rural landscapes, won a U.S.

House seat that was open due to the retirement of a Republican. Colorado voters also approved ballot initiatives promoting mass transit and renewable energy.

Montanans soundly rejected a ballot initiative to allow cyanide-leach gold mining, approved local proposals to buy open space and more tightly regulate natural gas drilling, and elected a governor, Democrat Brian Schweitzer, who championed environmental issues. Two years earlier, voters in Arizona and New Mexico had given the governor's mansion to pro-conservation Democrats, while in Wyoming, one of the nation's largest coal and natural gas producers, Democrat Dave Freudenthal won the governor's race (defeating an oil and gas businessman) by promising to balance energy extraction with environmental protection.

"Jobs, the economy, and education are still top issues," says Bob Ekey, director of The Wilderness Society's Northern Rockies office in Bozeman, Montana, "but almost every time in the West when people have a chance to vote on a conservation issue, they approve it." Polls show that nearly two-thirds of voters in the region hold strong environmental beliefs. "We see this 'conservation

Westerners to vote for conservation. The

fledgling Intermountain West Project, spearheaded by the LCV, will be a ten-year, "multi-million-dollar" effort, Massaro says. The project will focus on seven big public lands states—Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada—in an effort to elect conservation-minded politicians at the local, state, and federal level.

Energy extraction is not the only concern. Water shortages, urban sprawl, and misgivings about Bush's effort to allow logging and road building across millions of acres of unroaded forests are riling more and more Westerners.

This gathering discontent rattled a number of ballot boxes in 2004. Colorado Conservation Voters won 15 of 16 state legislative races it targeted, helping Democrats win control of the legislature for the first time in 44 years. Voters also elected Democrat Ken Salazar, whose campaign slogan was "Protecting Colorado's Land, Water and People," to the U.S. Senate, defeating pro-business Republican Pete Coors. Salazar's brother John, a

majority' becoming more vocal," Ekey says, "and we are working with ranchers, teachers, business people, and others to get them more engaged. Our campaigns to protect the Rocky Mountain Front and other natural treasures have started to look more like Main Street."

Additional evidence of this trend has emerged in 2005. Almost all the region's legislatures have passed laws to conserve resources. In Wyoming, ranchers and environmentalists teamed up to help pass legislation giving landowners more say over drilling and mining in places where they own only the surface rights. And after having failed three times in prior years, the legislature in Cheyenne established a fund to safeguard wildlife habitat. Idaho, where Republicans control both houses, approved a bill requiring mining companies to pay up front to cover the costs of mining cleanups.

Hunters and fishermen are a key voting bloc. Democrats have traditionally fared poorly with the hook and bullet crowd, largely because of the party's stance on gun control. But Democrats such as Schweitzer and Richardson have won support from sportsmen by endorsing Second Amendment rights and fighting to protect hunters' and anglers' access to wildlands. Richardson has enlisted the help of sportsmen, ranchers, farmers, and conservative county commissioners to fight the Bush administration's plan to drill two wildlife-rich places: 1.2 million-acre Otero Mesa and 100,000-acre Valle Vidal.

Richardson is hardly the only Western governor to butt heads with Bush over public lands policies. When a Bureau of Land Management official criticized a new Wyoming law that would require gas companies to compensate landowners for loss of property value due to drilling, Freudenthal's administration dared the Bureau of Land Management to sue. In Montana, Schweitzer sent Bush a critical letter that lambasted the White House effort to open roadless areas where "hunting, outfitting, hiking, horsepacking, camping, wildlife watching, and all sorts of family recreation flourish."

Recreation, health care, and other service-sector industries have become important drivers of the West's economy. Today, just three percent of personal income in the West comes from extractive industries. Bozeman, Missoula, and Boise are among the cities with thriving high-tech sectors. "Montana has been called 'the Treasure State,'" Schweitzer says. "The actual treasure isn't the minerals inside the mountain; it's the mountain itself—and our wildlands and wildlife. That's why we're the Treasure State."

The West's demographics are also changing. Retirees and white-collar workers are moving in to enjoy the quality of life. A flood of Hispanic immigrants has infused the area with new political blood. Nevada's population doubled during the 1990s, Colorado grew by 30 percent and Arizona by 40 percent.

But Western political experts sound a note of caution. "I don't think you can generalize yet that there is a major conservation trend developing," says Boise State University political science professor John Freemuth, who tracks regional politics. "A lot of people thought this population growth would turn Idaho blue. It hasn't. Many of these new residents came to escape liberal California. But we're also not just a bunch of red state, pickup-truck-driving stereotypes. We're a region in flux." National environmental groups have failed to convert Westerners to their cause in the past because their message was not tailored to the region's unique politics, he adds.

The Intermountain West Project will work with grassroots groups and conduct polls and focus groups to develop an environmental message that resonates with Westerners' values of fairness, security, and independence, Massaro says. While the campaign's objective is to swing state and local elections, taking the White House is the end goal. "If a pro-conservation candidate is going to win the presidency in 2008," Massaro says, "he's going to have to win some western states."

If that happens, Freemuth says, "then you can say something really fundamental has changed in the region."

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