

In West, Conservatives Emphasize the 'Conserve'

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Saturday, December 2, 2006; A01

SEATTLE -- Nearly a decade ago, historian Patricia Nelson Limerick set the modern American West to verse:

The West has been lucky, it's true.

It did not grow old -- it grew new.

As it grew older, it got fresher and bolder.

Don't you wish it could happen to you?

Limerick and others said in the 1990s that the New West was shedding its slavish reliance on mining, logging, ranching and dams. They prophesied that it would become a region where the economy, politics and popular culture were dominated by urban people who went outdoors not to chop down trees, punch cows or pour concrete but to recreate, appreciate and preserve.

That prophecy proved premature. Working-class indignation exploded in the Interior West against environmentalists, Democrats and outside agitators, stalling efforts by the Clinton administration to rewrite grazing, mining and forestry laws. Republicans shrewdly harnessed the populist anger and consolidated political control, and in 2000 they began an aggressive push for oil, gas and mineral extraction on public land.

Last month's elections, though, may signal the end of Republican dominance and fierce resistance to many conservation measures. Profound demographic and economic change seems finally to be asserting itself across the region. Westerners cast votes suggesting that the protection of their natural surroundings is not a negotiable condition for living well.

"Self-interest has intersected with reality," said Limerick, chair of the board of the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "To have open spaces and nice places, people realize, they cannot be a bunch of individuals pursuing self-indulgence. They have to act collectively."

To that end, much of the West rejected ballot measures that could have shredded state and local land-use rules limiting growth, controlling sprawl and ensuring open space. Voters in Idaho, Washington and California soundly defeated "takings" measures, intended to compensate individual owners whose land is devalued by land-use or zoning laws. Arizona voters approved their law. Courts had earlier tossed out the measures in Montana and Nevada.

At the same time, Democrats consolidated gains from 2004, picking up the governorship in Colorado, a Senate seat in Montana and two House seats in Arizona. Democrats already controlled governor's seats in Arizona, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming.

Perhaps more significant, Democratic and Republican politicians from New Mexico to Montana have found common ground with hunters and anglers in opposing widespread energy development on wild public lands, halting drilling in several areas where the public felt that wildlife and scenic values trumped economic consideration. In the past year, bipartisan grass-roots opposition has also killed off a number of proposals to sell federal land and use the revenue to pay for governmental operations.

There has been widespread change, too, in state attitudes toward the Clinton-era roadless rule, a broad land-protection measure that put nearly a third of the national forests off-limits to most development. The 2001 rule, which was overturned by the Bush administration but reinstated by a federal judge in September, initially had almost no public support from state fish and game agencies or from Western governors.

Now, fish and game agencies in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon, Colorado and Montana all support protecting the forests from roads, as do the governors of those states.

Even in Idaho, probably the most conservative and solidly Republican Western state, the Fish and Game Department advocates keeping wild areas roadless, and Gov. James E. Risch (R) said he intends to manage 8.5 million acres of the state's roadless forests in a way that is consistent with the conservation spirit of the Clinton rule.

"Idahoans care about how these roadless areas are managed," Risch told a panel in Washington, D.C., this week. "These are places where they hunt, fish and hike."

Like many politicians across the West, Risch is responding to changing public attitudes, said Rick Johnson, executive director of the Idaho Conservation League.

"It used to be that the West was big enough that you could pretty much do anything you wanted," Johnson said. He lives in Boise, the largest city in Idaho, a state outpaced in growth by only Nevada and Arizona. "The natural surroundings are now being lost, and we sit in traffic like everyone else. We want to protect what's left," he said. "We just don't like Washington, D.C., telling us how to do it."

While it remains the most rural part of the country in terms of land use, the West has also become the most densely urban in terms of where people live. Compared with new neighborhoods in the East or South, houses in new developments in the West tend to be planted much closer together.

"The New West is best understood as islands of urban economics in a rural setting," said Ray Rasker, executive director of Headwaters Economics, a think tank in Bozeman,

Mont. "They are made possible by a combination of environmental amenities combined with the presence of transportation, especially good airports."

Newcomers with deep pockets populate many of these islands. Retirement and investment money accounts for about a third of total personal income across the Rocky Mountain West, according to federal figures. In some states, this money dwarfs the personal income from mining, forestry, farming and energy extraction.

"What had been seen as a 'war on the West' by outside forces is not seen that way anymore," said Thomas Michael Power, chairman of the economics department at the University of Montana in Missoula.

"It is more visible to everyone now that the economy has changed fundamentally," he said. "The people who are ranching and farming know these things, and that is why they are willing to be bought out, why they are willing to sell part of their water rights."

There is widespread agreement among economists, demographers and politicians that the region's moneyed newcomers tend to be conservative when it comes to government involvement in their lives. But they also want government to protect and preserve the natural beauty that lured them to the Rocky Mountain West.

"Folks don't want a whole lot of government, but they want things like clean water, and they want us to be careful," Jon Tester, the Democratic senator-elect from Montana, said in an interview before the election.

A final key piece in the long-awaited emergence of the New West as a place inclined to support land and water conservation has to do with how environmental groups work with local people.

In the 1990s, environmental groups rarely bothered to listen to the concerns of farmers, ranchers or business leaders, according to Chris Wood, vice president for conservation programs at Trout Unlimited.

"We thought we didn't need to, that we could ride these demographic changes to a better regulatory outcome for the environment," Wood said. "Now we are recognizing that we can still achieve good outcomes by sitting and listening to people, without landowners feeling like we forced it down their throats."