

Editorial: Turning Up the Heat

October, 2002

We know, we know...Washington D.C. is a different world. It's about process and politics. It's not about the hard, cold realities of 20 dead firefighters and 6 million acres of burned forests and rangeland in one devastating summer of 2002. We know.

But we're still disappointed. Even insiders in D.C. have privately called it "pathetic."

And the greatest disappointment across the West is over Sen. Ron Wyden's last-minute waffle, his last-minute turnaround on the Forest Health Initiative put forward by Sen. Larry Craig-R, Idaho and Sen. Pete Domenici-R, New Mexico.

Craig, Domenici and Sen. Kyl of Arizona all felt the heat of the summer fires, and they felt the tide of public opinion turning as the nightly news reinforced, over and over, that radical environmentalism had taken us too far. Their proposed legislation would have lit a fire under the Forest Service to get forest health thinning and cleanup projects moving quickly, without the incessant and insidious court battles brought by preservation groups.

Every night images of our beautiful national forests going up in flames refuted the claims of groups like the Sierra Club, and here locally the Oregon Natural Resources Council, that thinning forests was a bad idea.

At first Wyden's office seemed to signal their willingness to sign on to the Craig-Domenici approach that focused on forest health. But as the vote approached Sen. Wyden delivered a floor speech indicating that perhaps he was feeling more heat from his radical environmentalist supporters than from the forest fires that ravaged his home state through the summer.

That's Washington D.C. politics. That's the game at its worst.

Wyden's last-minute change of heart wasn't entirely unpredictable or remarkable. But it did potentially mark a significant turning point in the Oregon senator's career. That's because there are rare, key moments in every senator's career where they have the choice between being typical Washington D.C. senators (they're a dime a dozen) and being statesmen. This was one of those moments.

Flipping to go along with campaign contributors or to go along with Democrat party political lines may be too harsh a description of why Wyden changed his vote. What's more likely is that the senator realized he didn't have the seniority or the political muscle to make the real difference on this vote. That being the case, why irritate his party or his core supporters?

Because it is the right thing to do for his state—for all of Oregon, for all Oregonians. Because that's what a statesman does. Stands up for the best interests of his state, even if the vote goes against him.

Our state was on fire this summer and unless our leaders lead, now, the state will be on fire again next summer. Lives were lost—20 lives, some of them Oregonians. More will be lost next summer unless our leaders step up to the role of statesmen.

This was, still is, a key moment in Sen. Wyden's career, and it shouldn't be that great a political risk either. All senators are given the occasional go-ahead from party leadership on issues of this magnitude for their home states—a go-ahead to break ranks and vote for the good of their home state, to be statesmen.

Equally important, public opinion is shifting to place more trust in forest scientists than in the so-called "non-profit" groups whose steady fundraising drumbeat is based on overblown rhetoric about timber practices abandoned more than twenty years ago. Sen. Wyden undoubtedly recognizes that the radical environmentalists turning up the heat on this issue do so because they sense the tide turning against them.

The choices are simple. Respond to the national pressure groups, play the game and join, perhaps permanently, the ranks of the party hacks in Washington D.C., or stand up for the state of Oregon in a time of crisis.

We're disappointed, but not without hope. We hope Sen. Wyden will rethink his views as he visits a burned forest or stands over the grave of a fallen firefighter. We hope Sen. Wyden will come home to Oregon.