

The Man from Hood River

Will He Come Home to Solve Oregon's Leadership Crisis?

By Jim Pasero

Greg Walden is running for re-election in Oregon's second congressional district. Two years ago his district sent him back to Congress with 72 percent of the vote. Four years ago he got 74 percent. That year he ran 14 points ahead of President Bush in his district. No one in Oregon can remember the last time a politician was re-elected with vote totals in the 70th percentile. Even Congressman Earl Blumenauer, in the state's heavily liberal third congressional district, returns to Congress with totals in the 60s.

If Walden is this popular, will he be Oregon's next governor? Two things stand in his path: the current incumbent Ted Kulongoski, and a Congressional career that looks like a fast track to be Speaker of the U.S. House.

Morning in Hood River

Monday morning, 4:30 a.m. The alarm bell rings and the week begins at the Walden house on Sherman street in Hood River.

The Congressman from Oregon's Second District—a district which, according to Michael Barone's *Almanac of American Politics*, "covers all of the state east of the Cascades and the southernmost valley between the Cascades and the Coast Range"—is on his way to work. It's not a short commute to the nation's capital in Washington D.C., and Greg Walden has made the trip in his five-year congressional career more than 200 times—more than 40 times a year, more than three times a month. Says Walden *somewhat* goodnaturedly, about the benefits of the long travel, "You get a lot of great airline food."

In the next hour Walden will get in his car, say goodbye to his wife of 22 years, Mylene, and his 14-year-old son, Anthony, and make the 60-mile drive from Hood River to Portland Airport.

By 8 a.m. Walden is on board the flight that will take him to the Capitol and to the 432-sq. ft. basement apartment that he rents a block away from the Cannon House Office Building and the Library of Congress's Madison Building.

What does he keep on hand in his refrigerator in D.C.?

"Coffee," answers Walden.

Often his seatmate on the 8 a.m. flight to D.C. is Washington Congressman Brian Baird, a Democrat who was elected the same year as Walden—'98. Says Baird, a clinical

psychologist and author, about representing his district that borders Oregon and Walden's district, "Quite a few Oregonians have moved to Vancouver, which makes my district either the Third District of Washington state or the Sixth District of Oregon."

Baird comments about the travel rigors of a Western congressman: "It's a stress for your family and for your body. Every time I take a red eye it takes me two to three days to recover."

And then there's the travel time at home in-district. Other than at-large districts that encompass a whole state, Oregon's Second Congressional District is the second largest in the nation. "The pace is typical that anything less than a 12 hour day is rare," says Baird. "My district is big (southwest Washington), but Greg's is huge."

Long Days in D.C.

Somewhere in those 200+ round trips to Washington D.C. that Walden has made in the last five years he's carried the hopes of the people of his district with him. And it's a district that has needed an effective congressman.

Walden comments about the economy of Oregon's Second Congressional District, "The irony is that the state didn't really feel the hardship that rural Oregon was enduring until the metropolitan area had an economic problem, and then the state had an economic problem. Yes, Portland is the engine in so many aspects but it is frustrating being out in the rural areas and feeling ignored and hearing about how great the economy is in Oregon (or was). Well go to John Day or Burns over the last 10 years—everybody said the economy was great but they didn't come here and look."

Walden argues that rural Oregon had never really come out of the recession of the early 1980s when the state entered a new recession in '01. He's not complaining; he's just qualified to fill in some omitted details.

During the last three years several high profile issues emerged to put the Second Congressional District and its congressman on the public radar—issues upon which the congressman worked tirelessly and spoke articulately. In the summer of '01 the U.S. Interior Department's water shutoff in the Klamath Basin led the national TV networks night after night. The Interior Dept. was attempting to save the endangered suckerfish at the expense of farmers in Walden's district. Walden reacted to the disaster in a way that marks his style. He was all over the President and the administration.

That summer Walden spent a lot of time on the phone lobbying the Interior Department, but to his frustration the new administration had few new staff positions in place. Walden remembers Secretary Norton's plight. "When it first started to happen, she had two staff members only. She literally had herself, her chief of staff, and another person approved, when the water got shut off. All the rest were either vacant, career civil servants, or positions held by Clinton holdovers."

In January of '02, Walden tried another approach. He and Sen. Gordon Smith flew to Ontario, Calif. where they jumped on Air Force One and lobbied the President for two hours on the way to a fundraiser in Portland. (It was only four months after 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan turned just a month before) Walden, who drove the discussion for two hours, remembers the President's reaction to putting the rights of fish before farmers. Says Walden about the conversation with the President, "My goal was Klamath...to get that up on his radar screen. And we talked about the problem and he turned to Karl (Rove) and said, 'Can't I just issue an executive order to overturn this?'

"Karl said 'Sorry, Mr. President, it's the Endangered Species Act.'

"We had a long discussion about the problem ... and when he landed in Portland he added Klamath to his speech."

"I recall vividly flying with Greg on Air Force One, talking intently on rural issues and seeing how President Bush valued Greg's insights," says U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, the third party to the conversation that day. "Politicians gifts are manifest through communication, and I saw Greg have a real impact on the heart and mind of the President. He was taking in all that Greg was giving him."

Walden pressured the President all that year. "It was the President who would tell me talk to Karl, talk to Karl..."

"Whenever I would see the President I would raise the issue, and I would go out of my way to be at a rope line when he was going to be at a conference, or be along the center aisle at the State of Union. For a long time," jokes Walden, "the president thought my name was Klamath."

To this day, when asked whether Klamath water rights or the Biscuit Fire rankles westerners more, Walden is quick with an answer: "Klamath."

Why? "Because scientists without any double checking got it wrong and the National Academy proved that point."

This July Walden held a congressional hearing in Klamath Falls on amending the Endangered Species Act, which promises to be high profile in the next Congress.

Walden, who grew up in Hood River and The Dallas, and had an uncle who worked for the Forest Service, also took the lead in his first term preventing Steens Mountain from becoming a national monument. Walden remembers the process: "I went to French Glen and held a meeting with the ranching community and said, 'It looks like we have two options—we can do nothing, and take our chances on a national monument where the government will set all the rules, or we can try to write legislation and you be party to it and if you don't like it, we're in the majority and I can kill it—you decide.'"

The result: “The ranchers came forward with a cow-free wilderness area in exchange for the ability to continue to do ranching lower on the mountain.”

In the cooperative agreement completed in the fall of 2000, Walden says he is most proud of the local involvement of management techniques that may not be allowed in other wilderness areas. “We created our own package to work on that,” says Walden, and in a state where more than half of the land is owned and managed, or mismanaged, by the federal government, that’s not a small deal.

Creating Healthy Forests

But by his third term dramatic wildfires had burned nearly 10 million acres of national forests in the West. Oregon’s Biscuit Fire was just one of those fires. The sheer devastation, the disastrous federal forest policy, the refusal of environmentalists to let the federal government manage these forests, and Walden’s knowledge and passion on the issue helped secure Walden the chairmanship of the Resource Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health.

The outgoing chairman of the Subcommittee on Forest and Forests Health, Colorado’s Scott McInnis discusses the political change that led to such a disastrous federal forest policy. “When I took the chairmanship it was a dull committee, but then the fires broke out and it became one of the most sought after.”

A decade earlier, McInnis and his wife removed the bodies of 14 firefighters from Colorado’s Storm King Mountain. The issue is personal with him.

“Environmentalists in the ’60s were anti-multiple use for the forests—groups like the Sierra Club, Earth First, Greenpeace, and the Wilderness Society. These groups opposed multiple use in their public debate. They wanted the national forests to go from a land of many uses to no trespassing. But they couldn’t win their debates against the forest service people because they know their product. The environmentalists figured out the forest service would base their arguments on science, so they moved the decision making process over the next 20 years from science at the forest level to an emotional level at Congress. And then they moved to the courtroom. Between those two strategies the forests were greatly mismanaged.”

Walden says, “I get so tired of driving through eastern Oregon towns where the mills are not only closed but auctioned and gone, and the forests are overgrown and dying, and we’re losing the infrastructure to do the management work that good stewardship demands.

“People talk about a 15-acre clear cut as if it’s a terrible thing, and don’t say a word about a half million-acre moonscape after a fire,” says Walden. “They say, well that’s natural... Well okay, but my son and grandkids are never going to enjoy the big green healthy

forests that we have today if we stand back and litigate and appeal and take no action, perform no stewardship, and it all goes up in smoke. That's not very good habitat."

Walden, like McInnis, grew up with knowledge of the forests. Their passion drove the passing of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act in this 108th Congress. McInnis and Walden had hoped to pass the bill in the 107th Congress, but were blocked by Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, who hoped to keep the issue alive in the '02 election.

But the disastrous California fires that summer moved key western Democrat senators. California Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden wanted to get something done—and fast. "Had those fires not occurred, the Senate would have put it on the shelf and not heard it," says McInnis.

Getting the Healthy Forest Restoration Act passed was critical, says Chris West, Vice President of the American Forest Resource Council, because it changed the paradigm of the discussion, where the needle had been stuck for 30 years. "The debate," says West, "evolved from *jobs and logging to preserving our habitats and home*.

"Most of the change will come not from the bill," says West, "but from 1) administrative rule fixes, 2) legislative fixes, and 3) changing the debate and refocusing how people manage the forests. Congress will now worry about forest health and so will the federal agencies. That's the change in the paradigm."

There are 190 million acres of federal forests that need to be thinned, and the Act has only authorized the thinning of 20 million acres. This year the federal government will treat two million acres. "It's a big job," says McInnis, "thinning an acre takes a lot of work."

Though McInnis' name is on the bill, he says "It really should be the McInnis-Walden bill. My forest bill would not have passed if it had not been for Greg Walden."

McInnis and Walden worked tirelessly writing, planning strategy, and finally lobbying for the bill. McInnis describes how he and Walden persuaded some of the more stubborn members of Congress to come aboard. The technique was good cop, bad cop. "I am a grumpy guy," says McInnis. "When I was lobbying a member I would lose my temper, say *to hell with it, see you next year*, and stomp out of the room, and then give Greg a high-five and he would go in. Greg is a master at smoothing things over, and he has a talent at finding common ground."

In the end, says McInnis, he and Walden passed what he believes is the most significant piece of forest legislation in 50 years. As for what he thinks of his legislative partner, McInnis says, "While I'm retiring, you're just beginning to see Greg's talents."

Defining Leadership

Mary Bono, who represents California's 45th district, serves on the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet with Walden and has watched him work the last three sessions. "How do you define leadership?" asks Bono. "You look behind the veil of who the person is presenting to who he really is."

In Walden she sees the real deal. "In a body of 435 people, I have friends and Greg is one of them. He hasn't come here with blazing ambition. Some members come here with ambition higher than their skills, some come to run for President and they don't care who they walk over. Greg would never walk over someone for higher office. Are members truly here for public service, to serve this country, or are they here for their own purposes? There is good ambition and bad ambition. Greg reminds me of Sonny—plainspoken, friendly, and people like working with him."

And his leadership skills? "If his name is on something," says Bono, "members will look at the bill and believe there is merit in it. It really is his greatest asset. He is the kind of person I would get in line behind. I respect and admire his ability to lead."

Cong. Baird says that Walden was influential in getting him to vote for the Healthy Forest bill, even though Norm Dicks, dean of the Washington Democrat delegation, and Peter DeFazio were breaking against the bill. "Greg did a very good job on the Healthy Forest bill. He's very thoughtful," says Baird. "You could ask him about any aspect of the bill and he knew it, was willing to discuss it, and came back promptly with good answers. I had some concerns, we sat down and discussed it, and I voted for the bill, even though I didn't vote for it the first round."

Baird would later explain his vote to his constituents this way. "I thought it was a pro-environment vote—good for public safety, good for our forests. They're not always antithetical. We can find some common ground."

The leadership skills that Representatives McInnis, Bono, and Baird see in Walden are skills that Oregonians are noticing—especially at a time when the state is suffering the Goldschmidt fallout, and the governor is perceived as nice but weak.

Filling the Void

So is three-term Cong. Greg Walden the answer to the state's leadership crisis? Should he be the next governor of Oregon? Can he redirect the state with the worst economy in the country?

Maybe. But Walden is taking dead aim at Kulongoski's leadership skills. And he is not impressed.

“Governor Kulongoski abrogated his leadership responsibility in my mind,” says Walden bluntly.

What does Walden, former two-term majority leader of the Oregon House, think of the state of Oregon being running by Democrat governors for 20 years? “It’s just as when the Congress turned over after 40 years (‘94)...there is a time when you have to give a different philosophy an opportunity to show you how it could be done better, and I think Oregon needs that. Now.”

Walden is critical of two things in Kulongoski’s first two years in office—his support of tax increases, and his willingness to follow rather than lead the legislature.

“As governor you can make a difference, if you want to. Arnold has star power, but look at how he has used his talents to turn around a decade-long seige in Sacramento of one-party destroying the state’s economy.

“What we’ve seen for too long in Oregon is that the only change a governor would come forward with is, ‘I want to take more of your money through higher taxes.’ And voters say, ‘Uh, I don’t think so.’ And a year later the voters say, again, ‘Didn’t we tell you—I don’t think so?’

“So it would be nice to have a governor who said, ‘Here’s another way—let’s grow this state.’ But again, if your philosophy is that government holds the solution, that by growing government that will solve the problem, then your only solution is to go and raise taxes, because you’ve got to pay for it. And that is the cycle that we’ve been in far too long.

“I used to get frustrated when I was on the Ways and Means committee in Salem trying to get at waste in government,” says Walden. “But you cannot control these budgets as a legislator. You don’t have the time in six months to out-think the bureaucrats, you don’t have the expertise to get into that level. That’s the job of the executive—to run the agencies. That’s where the change can be driven effectively.”

But that’s not Kulongoski, says Walden. “You don’t say to the legislature, ‘Lead the state, and I’ll follow.’ Whoever is governor has got to lead, and that’s not always easy.”

Walden remembers Governor Atiyeh saying that they couldn’t take the office away from him. “He had his term, and he was going to use it,” says Walden. “He was going to make the decisions he felt were in the best interests of the state, even if at times they weren’t popular.”

Does Greg Walden want to be governor? “Yes,” says Walden.

When? “Someday,” he answers.

“I think being governor would be the ultimate public serve calling because it’s a state I care deeply about. I think it would be an extraordinary opportunity to see if you couldn’t move this state forward by bringing in some new blood, by tapping into enormous resources that are out there, intellectual capital that has been shunned for years. We always seem to go back to the same people to run the agencies, the same people to serve on the boards and commissions. There are many other people out there with extraordinary talent that could be tapped.”

Should the Governor be retired in '06? “I think the state would be served with a shake-up, a clean-out...it’s time.”

It may be time for Oregon to change governing parties, but is it time for Walden?

For Oregon’s natural resource community this is a complicated question. To have a skillful rising star in the U.S. House, and the chairmanship of a critical subcommittee is potent.

Mike Fahey, CEO of Columbia Helicopters in Aurora, Ore., says he spends about 15 to 20 percent of his time on federal policy issues, and that having Walden as the point person is invaluable. “Where he is right now is important, but within a couple of years his input nationally will only get bigger,” says Fahey, “and what I want is good forest policy for the nation. If you want to have a solid economy, you can’t do it without resources.”

Dale Riddle, VP of Seneca Sawmills in Eugene, Ore., and chairman of the legal committee for the American Forest Resource Council, echoes sentiments about Walden’s talent and his importance to the resource industry in the U.S. House. “I wish we could clone him,” says Riddle.

Riddle, who along with Fahey, is one of the region’s leading strategist on federal resource issues, would prefer that Walden stay in Washington, but acknowledges the personal toll paid by working 3,000 miles from home. He adds, “Greg should do what is best for him and his family.”

Rob Freres, owner of Freres Lumber in Lyons, Ore., is also a longtime board member of Associated Oregon Industries. His thoughts reflect how many in Oregon’s business community may be feeling. “Because I am a timber-dependent mill owner I would prefer him where he is for my own self-interest. But when you look at it from the broader perspective, Greg would breathe new life into our state politics with his vigor, his enthusiasm, and his intellect. It’s obvious that 20 years of single-party domination has caused this state great harm. We have a crisis in leadership when Kulongoski relies on Goldschmidt for his ideas on higher education, and on Kitzhaber for forest policy. We have yet to hear an original idea from Kulongoski. He’s a nice guy, but he doesn’t have original ideas.”

A Winning Strategy?

The idea of Walden for governor campaign has tremendous appeal to Oregon's GOP, because he is popular and because it might resolve worries about the two current contenders, Ron Saxton and Kevin Mannix. Saxton could have difficulty winning the party's primary and Mannix could have difficulty winning statewide.

Walden, however, is cautious about future plans. "I really like what I am doing right now, and have gotten to a point in the Congress where I can really have a strong impact on legislation—legislation important to the Northwest. It takes a while to get there, so I'm not ready to say, here's an opportunity so I'll go do that now, because this is a huge responsibility."

But Walden adds: "I think about running for governor. I set up to run for governor in '94, until we found out our son had a heart defect. I was due to announce my candidacy on Monday and we found out about his heart condition on the Friday before and I called it off." (Walden's son died a day after his birth.)

There is another reason that Walden might decide not to run for Governor in '06, and that's because Kulongoski could be tough to beat if he chooses to run for reelection. Says Walden, "It's easier to win an open seat than to take out an incumbent, unless that incumbent has really faltered, and I don't think Kulongoski has really faltered yet...but he's weakened."

Pollster Tim Hibbitts, of Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall Inc. of Portland, says Walden is right to be cautious about Kulongoski's reelection chances. Says Hibbitts about Kulongoski: "I can script a scenario where he runs and wins, and I can script a scenario where he loses. The governor is well liked personally, but his job performance is not as strong as his personal rating. I wouldn't describe him as unpopular, but his job performance profile is fairly weak."

Is it accurate to see Kulongoski as Goldschmidt's puppet? No, says Hibbitts, that's not fair. "That's the same perception as people who claim that Bush is Cheney's puppet," In neither case is it accurate, believes Hibbitts.

Three elections in the last decade show Oregon closely politically divided: Wyden 48.4 percent vs. Smith 46.9 percent (U.S. Senate) '95. Gore 47.3 percent vs. Bush 46.9 percent (President) '00. And Kulongoski 49.1 percent vs. Mannix 46.3 percent (Governor) '02. In all three elections Republicans lost by a whisker.

So will the Goldschmidt fallout be enough to tilt the state away from one-party rule? Flip it Republican? Hibbitts says it's too early to assess the Goldschmidt damage, but doubts the scandal will be determinative in the '06 election.

However, Hibbitts does see a tightening of the state's politics. "The state registration between Ds and Rs (39 to 37) is the closest it's been in 40 years. That's a competitive

mix. You would assume there would be statewide officeholders from both parties. But why only Gordon?

“Republicans may blame it on the media,” says Hibbitts, “and there’s an element of truth to that. But the real problem is that Republicans harm themselves by running candidates who are further out of the mainstream than can win.”

Hibbitts believes that you have to adapt to the political climate of your state and he compares current Oregon Republicans to past Arizona Democrats who repeatedly nominated candidates too liberal to win. “Now the Democrats have a governor in Arizona,” says Hibbitts, “but she’s no flaming leftist.

“In Idaho, or Utah, a candidate from a strong conservative background can win, but not in Oregon,” says Hibbitts. “That’s just a fact of life.”

Hibbitts uses Kevin Mannix’s past campaign as the example. “Kevin Mannix ran a good campaign for governor but the odds would say that ’02 was his high water mark.” Hibbitts believes Mannix had everything going for him and still couldn’t win – “1) incumbents were relatively unpopular and 2) half the parties in control of state houses switched.”

As for Saxton winning a GOP primary. “Saxton needs to do some fence mending of the party’s base, which is culturally and economically conservative. He has to acknowledge that.”

Hibbitts sees Gordon Smith as the electable model, “a centrist conservative,” and puts Greg Walden in the same mold. Walden has all the elements to make him successful—he’s a moderate conservative, thoughtful, and he looks like he can broker deals.”

His biggest drawback: “He’s unknown outside his district,” says Hibbitts.

A Model to Follow

Dirk Kempthorne, current two-term governor of Idaho, faced a decision in ’98 much like one Walden faces for ’06. Kempthorne chose to leave a successful senate career, where his closest friend had been Majority Leader Bob Dole, to return to Boise and become governor. Why did he do it? “I always considered myself a hands-on individual and the opportunity to be the chief executive of a sovereign state was a great honor.”

Before Kempthorne made the decision to return to Boise he took a poll of his fellow senators. “I asked every incumbent U.S. Senator who had served as governor for their thoughts. Everyone without exception said if you can be the chief executive, that is something special, so go do it. You will never regret it.”

If Greg Walden decides to run for governor, he's got a clear idea of which past governor would be the model for his administration: Vic Atiyeh. Walden believes that every 25 years or so, when the economy is especially broken, you need a small businessman to be the state's CEO.

“One of the things that has kept me grounded all this time is being a small business person. We really haven't had a small businessperson or businessperson as governor in a generation, not since Vic Atiyeh. Atiyeh was a great governor. He held the line on spending in a very difficult time, and he laid the foundation for what growth we've seen in Oregon, what diversity we've seen in Oregon. Others have profited from him politically and otherwise. He did the heavy lifting.

“Often there have been people brought into government who are so far up in a business or public utility that they are big vision people who don't understand the gut instinct that small business people feel every day.”

Walden, who owns five radio stations with a total of 15 employees, has a ton of that gut instinct. The man from Hood River will need every ounce of it if he chooses to come home and run for governor.