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Sportsmen for Bush: Wise Up!

By Ted Williams

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Without enthusiastic support from most of America's 50 million hunters and anglers, George W. Bush and his appointees would still be employed by oil, gas and coal companies. I still see bumper stickers that say: "Another Sportsman for Bush." Yet as a lifelong sportsman myself, I wonder why even one sportsman, let alone "another," would want Bush running the country.

On the eve of Interior Secretary Gale Norton's nomination, the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance called her a "veteran conservation leader," proclaimed that she was "very smart and has a good background in sportsmen's issues" and scolded "the nation's most extreme environmental groups" for opposing her. Today, the more enlightened sportsmen's organizations feel betrayed by the administration and are trying to get the word out, but the rank-and-file still love Bush.

One problem with sportsmen is that they tend not to read. So they don't understand that Bush is systematically dismantling, neutralizing or defunding virtually every meaningful law, regulation and program that protects or restores fish and wildlife. For example, in the Rocky Mountain West, Bush's Bureau of Land Management has abandoned multiple-use management, mandated by law, and ordered field offices to favor oil and gas extraction over all else.

Exemptions to rules protecting wildlife, including game species such as elk, pronghorn, deer and sage grouse, are being granted whenever industry asks. Damage to wildlife is horrendous. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department has found that for every acre of winter range covered by oil and gas wells and drilling pads in the Upper Green River basin, elk abandon 97 acres.

I don't know a sportsman who favors dirty water. Yet on Jan. 10, 2003, the Bush administration issued a "guidance document" instructing its field agents not to bust parties who filled or fouled "isolated waters" that are non-navigable and "intrastate" (completely in one state) because migratory birds are present. No definition of "isolated waters" was provided, but the administration has since proclaimed them to be streams that flow intermittently or dip underground, and wetlands that don't have visible links to larger waters.

Additionally, the document ordered agents to get "headquarters approval" before citing a polluter, thereby dooming enforcement by initiating an endlessly ascending chain reaction of butt-covering permission requests. In issuing the guidance document, Bush rejected warnings from top wetlands experts, including 43 senior scientists from organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences, the Wildlife Society and the American Fisheries Society.

Concurrently, the administration announced a proposed rule, suggesting that isolated waters don't count anymore and inviting comment on how to define the word "isolated" so as to make the Clean Water Act more palatable to those it inconveniences. If the rule goes through, it could degrade 80 percent of the stream miles in the United States.

The enforcement ban—designed by such interests as the National Association of Home Builders, state farm bureaus, the American Forest and Paper Association, Dow Chemical, and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association—derives from a bizarre interpretation of a 2001 Supreme Court decision. The court held that water-filled gravel pits in Illinois can't be protected by the Clean Water Act just because they're used by migratory birds. There was nothing in the decision remotely connected to the

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administration's broad and creative definition of the word "isolated." Most courts and even Bush's own Justice Department find the guidance document patently illegal.

Isolated wetlands—prairie potholes, for instance—are critical to waterfowl. And in many cases intermittent streams are more important to fish than main stems because they provide refuge from heat in summer, refuge from ice in winter, and refuge from floods year round.

When Jim Martin, former fisheries chief for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, was a young biologist, one of his first projects was to research the steelhead of the Rogue River. He found spawners seeking out intermittent streams.

"They'd move into them for refuge during winter rains when the mainstems were raging," he reports. "At that time, developers were diverting and damming these streams, cutting down their riparian forests, building houses next to them, all because they were thought to be inconsequential."

Martin and his colleagues learned all this in the 1970s. But these are facts the Bush administration doesn't want to know. Now, lakes, reservoirs, even municipal water supplies can be fouled by, say, factory feedlots discharging into feeder streams. It makes as much sense as screening human blood for HIV and hepatitis, then freezing it in unwashed milk cartons.

Recently, a few of the hook-and-bullet magazines that helped put Bush in power are criticizing him. But I still see those bumper stickers, and not just because the drivers are too lazy to peel them off.

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