

The Statesman - Opinion
Issue: 8/30/04

Federal government harming West

By Jim Beers

There is something of great importance emerging from the Northern and Southern Rocky Mountain states today that all Americans need to keep an eye on. The past thirty years have seen the passage of increasingly harsh and harmful Federal environmental laws and regulations. This has led to Federal agencies closing Federal lands and declaring rights for plants and animals that supercede the rights of citizens to their property and their traditions and cultures. This has decimated rural economies, rural communities, and the ranches, farms, and activities that have made Americans the envy of the world.

Nowhere have these harms to citizens from Federal laws been as numerous or egregious as in the West. Because of large Federal land ownerships the impacts of wolves, bull trout, Jumping Mice, blind fish, and Wilderness and Roadless designations plus Critical Habitats, land acquisitions, and easement offers to stressed landowners have exceeded the damage to date in the East or South or Midwest. However, anyone that has been keeping track of these things knows that just as the harms have accumulated in the West, so too will they (only at a slower pace) in the rest of the country.

Because they are at the forefront of these harms, westerners have been forced to try and protect their interests and rights. The alternatives are to lose those rights such as use of their own property, or access to public property that goes unmanaged more every year, to even being able to access their own property by road. What have they found?

They have found an increasingly autocratic Federal bureaucracy that not only disdains their protests but is also staffed with Federal employees committed to depopulating rural areas so as to place them entirely under Federal controls. They have found State bureaucracies that they believed worked for them but that really work with Federal counterparts to preserve Federal funding, get new Federal funding, and ultimately share in the new authorities being transferred from States to Federal agencies. They have found Federal politicians with ironclad tenure that pander to far away urban coalitions, environmental extremists, and animal rights radicals that provide financial support and publicity. Finally, they have found State politicians that have grown meek and timid before Federal demands tied to Federal dollars. What have they done?

Westerners in Arizona and New Mexico as well as in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming are taking the Federal government to Court. In some States like Wyoming, the State government is boldly stepping forth. In others like Idaho, individuals are recognizing that State bureaucracies need to be brought back under the control of State government. But the big development is the movement for individuals and groups like the Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd to sue the Federal government. Before you go, "heck, that's a waste of time," there is a new wrinkle: they are enlisting local (County) government support in their lawsuits. This gives them increased "standing" in Court.

In Arizona and New Mexico Counties have formed a coalition that even CROSSES STATE LINES to band together to address the increasing harm of Federal bureaucrats wielding environmental and animal rights mandates that harm Counties, ranches, rural communities, and the County tax base among other things. When governments sue government, the likelihood of positive results is greatly enhanced. I'd go so far as to predict that this movement will, as it goes forward, jar State governments and State bureaucracies back to a realization of their Constitutional responsibility to protect their citizens, their environment, and their way of life from all invaders be they a fish from China or a Federal bureaucrat from Washington, DC. Westwatching should be a very enlightening activity for all Americans in the future.