

EDITORIAL: The 'Curtain' Parts a Bit On Land, Water Conservation

By Yakima Herald-Republic Editorial Board
Yakima Herald-Republic
September 25, 2012

Much is written about the "Cascade Curtain," the physical divide that embodies a philosophical divide in Washington state. As a general rule, the curtain separates rainy, urbanized and politically liberal Western Washington from the arid, rural and conservative Central and Eastern Washington. These disparate attitudes frequently show up in election results.

In recent decades, the state's congressional districts honored that split; the boundary separating Central Washington's 4th District from its westside counterparts ran right down the spine of the Cascades.

But recent population shifts and the addition of the 10th District forced political mapmakers to reach across the Cascades in order to create districts with equal population; they chose to join suburbs in eastern King and Pierce counties with all of Kittitas and Chelan counties to form the 8th District, represented by Republican Congressman Dave Reichert. That means Ellensburg and Wenatchee share a congressman with cities like Reichert's hometown of Auburn along with Enumclaw and Bonney Lake.

The 8th District shares more than a congressman, according to a recent survey by Public Opinion Strategies, a national market research company with close ties to the Republican Party; Rep. Reichert is one of its clients. The outfit polled 400 likely voters throughout the district about conservation issues for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a federal grant program aimed at preserving land, and the state Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program.

According to a memo accompanying the survey, "These voters overwhelmingly say public lands are good for the state; two-thirds reject the idea that we have enough and don't need more; they say that public lands are good for the economy; and they overwhelmingly believe we have a moral responsibility to care for these lands. In fact, a solid majority say that public lands are one of the best things our government does."

That wouldn't be a stunner for suburban Seattle voters. But the survey also broke down some of its results by county. It found 70 percent support districtwide for an increase in funding for state conservation programs like the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program; it was higher in King County but held at 64 percent in Kittitas County. The question did not specify a funding source or tax increase.

Another question dealt with federal offshore drilling fees paid by oil and gas companies that are dedicated to the Land and Conservation Fund. Support was 85 percent in King County but almost as strong in Kittitas County at 81 percent.

Voters throughout the district said they engage in outdoor activities like hiking, horseback riding and hunting, which explains bipartisan support for conservation. Overall, 82 percent of respondents said issues of clean air, clean water and open space will factor into their vote, including 67 percent of Republicans.

Supporters of the programs are touting this data to muster up support for their cause, and certainly they have a political constituency. But what strikes us is this is one issue in which voters across the Cascades are more alike than different.