Passion and Politics

By Larry Burke

Scott Montgomery remembers his first trip to the Idaho Legislature. He picked up his new suit on the way and read his committee testimony word for word.

Totally comfortable slipping through whitewater rapids on the Payette River, the subtle bends and curves of the Legislature were uncharted waters for Montgomery.

"I didn't even know how to tie a tie," he says.

That was four years ago. Today, the Hewlett-Packard computer programmer is regarded as the savvy lobbyist who put together a textbook-perfect grass-roots campaign that led to passage of the Payette River Plan during the last session of the Idaho Legislature.

"I'd never been involved in politics. But they started messing with my river, and that was it," he says in reference to proposed hydroelectric development on his beloved kayak nirvana, the North Fork of the Payette.

Montgomery cut his lobbying teeth in 1988 working with Wendy Wilson and John Watts, founders of the Friends of the Payette, on a revision of the State Water Plan that made major philosophical changes in the way Idaho looks at its rivers.

The legislation authorized the state to conduct an inventory of potential uses for Idaho's river systems and adopt management plans tailored to the strengths of the various rivers. Those plans, which consider all uses and not just development, gave the state some leverage when the federal government makes decisions about those rivers.

But Montgomery's lobbying stamp is most clearly seen on one of those plans—last session's controversial Payette River Plan that emphasized the recreational value of the river over its hydroelectric potential.

"The Idaho Constitution says anyone who wants to can appropriate water for 'beneficial use.' That used to mean farming—today the word 'beneficial' has a different meaning than it did before," Montgomery says. "It [the Payette Plan] wasn't just to lock it up—what I wanted to see is that recreation gets an equal voice."

The Legislature heard that voice loud and clear.

Montgomery, who is working toward a bachelor's degree in computer science at BSU in his spare time, led a lobbying campaign that could have come from a case study in political science.

Early on, Montgomery realized that if Friends of the Payette was to succeed, it had to broaden its base. So he worked hard to bring all users of the river into the organization, rather than maintain its focus on whitewater sports.

Before it was over, several chambers of commerce, jet boaters, kayakers and even some ranchers were among those proudly wearing "The Payette is Not for Sale" T-shirts before the legislative vote.

SCOTT MONTGOMERY: *"Extremists raise our consciousness, but people in the middle make decisions."*

"You have to talk about the river only," he says of the coalition that supported the Payette, "because the rest of our philosophy is pretty wide apart."

Montgomery also worked hard at building trust and establishing personal relationships with legislators and other decision makers. Friends of the Payette organized VIP float trips to give legislators a feel for the river.

"That really worked—most of them had never been on the river," he says.

Montgomery recalls that when Friends of the Payette first started there were 15 people interested. By the time the issue was ready for a vote, the group had a mailing list of 10,000 people and 3,000 donors.

Montgomery is convinced that the group was successful because it was willing to compromise, rather than adopt an all-or-nothing approach.

"The extremists raise our consciousness, but the people in the middle will make the decisions," he says.

Friends of the Payette has disbanded since the Legislature adjourned, but the organizational model and lobbying plan remain as an example for other conservation groups to follow.

As for Montgomery, he's back on the Payette as often as possible, enjoying the results of his hard work.

"I'm here [at H-P] in a high-tech, high-stress situation. I can go out to the river, be there two minutes and it's Hewlett-Who?

"It just sets you free," he says. □

GLENN OAKLEY PHOTO

Guarding the Headgates

By Bob Evancho

"When you grow up in the Magic Valley," says Jim Yost, "you grow up knowing about agriculture."

And if you're one of the 32,000 members of the Idaho Farm Bureau, you probably know about Jim Yost. As the IFB's director of public affairs, the 42-year-old Boise State graduate is one of the Idaho farming and ranching industries' chief lobbyists.

A lifelong native of the Magic Valley, Yost lived on farms and ranches "off and on" throughout his youth. In 1971 he earned his education degree from BSU and taught in Nampa briefly before buying a dairy distributorship near Wendell. After that he was in the railroad business where he "learned about the transportation of various agricultural products, from frozen foods to other bulk commodities." In 1972 he was elected to the state Senate at the age of 23—making him the youngest senator in Idaho history.

JIM YOST: ***"I don't think we have a big philosophical difference [with recreationists]."***

Although he works on a variety of issues on behalf of agriculture, Yost's area of expertise is water rights and water quality — which comes in handy these days.

Agriculture has dominated water use in this state, but now there are growing pressures for other uses of water — recreation and conservation, primarily. The water rights debate escalated earlier this year with the passage of the Payette River Plan.

"We opposed it not based on provisions of the plan," Yost says. "Basically, we were in support of the plan, but there were a couple of changes we would like to have made."

Yost says the Idaho Farm Bureau wanted the measure to contain specific language to exempt the Payette River from federal wild and scenic river designation.

"But the opportunity never existed to implement any type of amendment to that legislation," Yost says. "Our objection was based on constitutional water rights and previous legislation that was passed in 1988. We believe that there has been a shift in water law in the state with the passage of the Payette River Plan, and we think those things need to be clarified — either with a court challenge or legislative changes."

Those changes include (1) adhering to the time frame in which river protection plans are submitted to the Legislature and (2) addressing IFB concerns regarding the difference between changes to water laws and additions to water plans. "It's important that these things are clarified, because there are several more water quality plans anticipated during the next few legislative sessions," Yost says.

Another contentious issue is the plan to place the Snake River sockeye salmon on the federal endangered species list. Such action, farmers and ranchers fear, would further reduce their ability to manipulate Idaho's water.

"Definitely one of the major areas of gravest concern to agriculture today is the Endangered Species Act," Yost says. He adds that the IFB, which represents about 65 percent of the state's farmers and ranchers, "strongly supports" rebuilding salmon runs, but with a balanced approach and not at the expense of irrigation.

"All the water in Idaho being held and released to flush the smolts will not return the salmon runs alone because of the eight downstream storage facilities," he says, referring to the federal dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers. "We think it needs to be a combination of flow management, reduced harvest, and trying to control the predation of the fish."

Despite the divisions between Idaho's many water users, Yost believes a healthy balance between irrigation and recreation/conservation can be achieved.

"I think basically that agriculture supplies water for recreationists and I don't think we have a big philosophical difference in the problems with water and water delivery," he says. "Take, for instance, the Payette River. The water that's used for recreation below Cascade [Reservoir] was [provided through] irrigation dollars. When we release our water downstream for irrigation use, the recreationists have the opportunity to enjoy the extreme flow."

Another issue where agriculture/ranching and recreation/conservation are divided is the Idaho Farm Bureau's push for additional reservoirs. "Whether that means replacing the Teton [Dam] or building the Galloway [Dam] or any other sites, we think the possibility should be investigated," Yost says. The additional reservoirs, he points out, could be used for flushing salmon and would provide more recreational opportunities.

Irrigation is Idaho farming's lifeblood, and Yost is working hard to make sure the flow remains strong. □

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Sources of Power

By Larry Burke

There was a time when Idaho Power Co. was regarded as the corporate version of the cigar-smoking back room deal maker, the consummate political chess player that used its considerable clout to move the pieces anywhere it wanted.

That image has changed, if it ever was reality in the first place. Today, Idaho Power is still an active player in the political arena, but in a kinder, gentler way.

The person who sets the political tone at Idaho Power is Larry Taylor, who 11 years ago left his anchor post at Boise's KTVB-TV to join Idaho Power's public relations staff. Last year he was named legislative affairs manager.

Like many Idaho Power executives, Taylor traces his roots deep into the state's history ... his great-great-great grandparents are buried in Idaho City.

"My job is simply telling the company's story on each issue," he says. "Our style has changed ... we're not out to force decisions but to articulate the issues as we see them. We have a lower profile than five-10 years ago. We aren't the political powerhouse we were once imagined to be."

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

LARRY TAYLOR: ***"We're not out to force decisions, but to articulate the issues as we see them."***

Idaho Power, now celebrating its 75th anniversary, is living in a political and social environment vastly different from that which existed during much of its history.

When it received licenses on its string of Snake River dams, hydropower, irrigation and flood control were paramount to wildlife or recreation concerns. That's changed, says Taylor.

"In no way are we going in with a preconceived idea that we are going to build a project no matter what, because we are sensitive to public concerns," he says. "The day is gone when a utility or any other business entity can simply step in and develop a public resource just because it might be legally right."

It may be much more difficult today to build new power plants, but that doesn't mean Idaho Power isn't planning on future growth.

"If we find locations that are environmentally acceptable and if we need the power, then we want to develop. But I think we are sympathetic to other uses of a public resource," Taylor says.

"All that we ask is that we have a chance to explain our future needs, our future choices, and have a seat at the table when a decision is made.

The company recently purchased the rights to study the old Wylie site near Bliss, a first step in the long process toward obtaining a license.

"Before Idaho Power turns its back on the Snake River, long known as the working river of Idaho and clearly responsible for low electric rates and a significant part of the economy we enjoy, we have to investigate sites that appear to have some viability and at least study them," he says.

In the meantime, Idaho Power is working hard to ensure retention of licenses to the dams it currently operates. Many of those licenses are up for renewal by the federal government in the next 10-15 years.

"We are approaching each of those as if we will have a competitor for the license. We anticipate there will be additional mitigation to meet the needs of fish and wildlife.

"Nationally projects are losing 5-15 megawatts because of mitigation. We anticipate that we'll have to take similar steps with our projects, and that will take away from generating capacity," Taylor says.

The Hells Canyon projects — what Taylor calls "the heart of Idaho Power's hydro system" — will especially come under close federal scrutiny because of their impact on salmon runs.

"We felt anadromous fish runs could be trucked around the dam. That didn't work and if we had realized it wouldn't, we would have done something different," Taylor says. "I'm sure if we were doing that project today, we would have been more sensitive to fish and wildlife."

Idaho Power, says Taylor, is currently in "resource balance," producing about the right amount of power at the right times of the year. The company will continue to develop its existing resources, such as additional capacity at Swan Falls Dam. And it will continue to push conservation measures as part of its resource plan.

But as Idaho's population grows, there will come a time when the state will face some tough decisions over its power sources, claims Taylor.

"Within the next two decades we may see another major hydro project in Idaho ... some choices will have to be made," he says. □

Surveying the Snow

By Amy Stahl

The new-fallen snow blanketing an Idaho mountainside means more to Peter Palmer than just great skiing. The snow hydrologist knows a season of heavy snowfall can bring needed relief for farmers suffering from five years of drought. It also can be good news for recreationists, power generators and others who depend on a healthy supply of water.

A snow survey supervisor with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service, Palmer oversees the collection of snowpack data. The data is used to make forecasts monitored closely by irrigators, flood control experts, hydropower engineers, boaters, conservationists and others.

PETER PALMER: ***"It's really an agricultural drought. There's plenty of water this year for recreation."***

Snow and snowpack make up 75 percent of the year's streamflow, which makes Palmer's data very important indeed. Water is a priceless gem in a heavily irrigated region like southern Idaho and there are a lot of interests struggling for a piece of the liquid pie. "It's difficult to integrate all of those uses," says Palmer, a North Carolina native who is an avid whitewater canoeist and kayaker.

At issue are the widely divergent expectations of water users. Reservoirs are a case in point. Irrigators want reservoirs to be drawn down slowly to maintain a steady flow to their fields. Flood control officials prefer that reservoirs are emptied earlier to avert potential damage. Hydropower interests hope to parcel out releases to meet peak electrical demand.

And recreational boaters, such as those who moor their boats at Spring Shores on Lucky Peak, like to keep the reservoir full for a long season of waterskiing and fishing. Not to mention the difficulty of tying a boat to a dock that is high and dry hundreds of feet from the water's edge by mid-summer.

Reservoir management, Palmer figures, "is a situation of compromises." And those compromises can be contentious given the number of competing interests. The drought compounds the problem — making SCS forecasts all the more critical.

Year after year the forecasts have been gloomy and the persistent drought conditions have taken a heavy toll, Palmer says. They have led to a reduction in soil moisture and created water quality problems in streams unable to "flush" themselves clean in the spring.

Fish have been among the resources most severely impacted. Their habitat has been damaged with less moisture nourishing the banks and warmer water temperatures resulting from low streamflows has been detrimental to the native trout. And even more alarming, juvenile salmon that have relied on natural spring flooding to push them to the ocean have been mired and confused in sluggish, low-level streams and reservoirs.

Palmer and his crew track Idaho's snowpack at 150 locations. They travel by snowshoe, ski, snow machine or helicopter to each site, collecting data at most locations monthly from January to March or June. Using an automated data collection and telemetry (SNO TEL) system, the surveyors drive a hollow aluminum tube through the snowpack to the ground and then weigh the core for water content. Their index of a basin's water content is then translated into spring runoff figures.

Not surprisingly, irrigators take the forecasts very seriously. In a water-short year they can be forced to change their farming practices. In some cases they have reduced their tillable acres, planted crops that don't require as much water and tried alternative management techniques, altering the type and timing of their irrigation systems.

While this year's early projections for southern Idaho called for another low water year — particularly devastating for farmers in the Wood River, Lost River and Oakley areas — not all the news is grim. "It's really an agricultural drought. There's plenty of water this year for recreation," Palmer says.

Boaters in northern Idaho and on the Payette River system are enjoying strong water flows, and although the Salmon River drainage is not at peak levels, rafters are expected to have a good recreational season.

The drought has, in fact, created a bit of a public relations problem for guides worried that potential customers are getting the wrong idea about Idaho's whitewater rivers. Palmer has been working with tourism officials at the Idaho Department of Commerce and Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association to get the word out on the wet and wild recreation season.

He says, "We're trying not to give the country the impression that there's not any water in Idaho." □

PHOTO COURTESY SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

Saving the Salmon

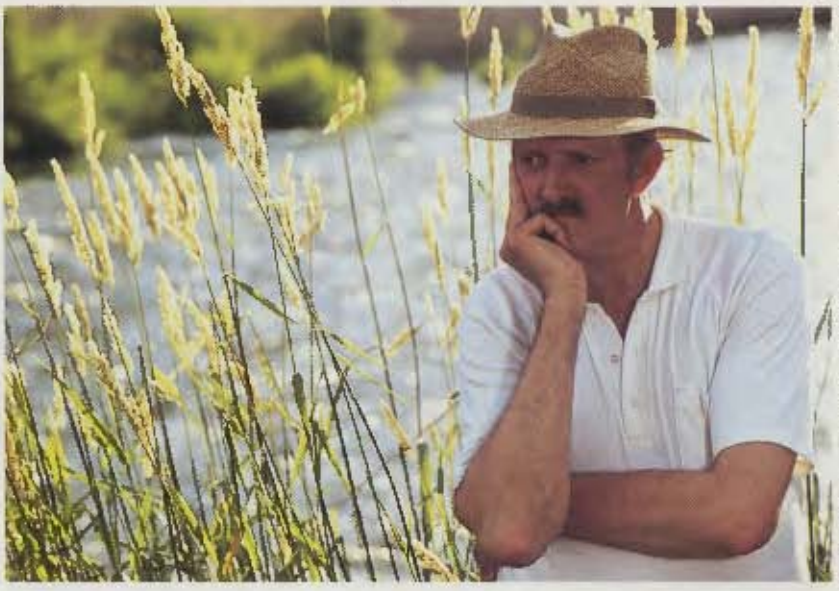
By Glenn Oakley

Ed Chaney has dedicated his life to saving a species he believes is already extinct.

"The Snake River sockeye are gone; we're just pretending they're not," he says. Of a species once so numerous their scarlet spawning colors inspired the name for Redfish Lake, only two were counted passing through Lower Granite Dam en route to Idaho in 1989; none in 1990 and three this year.

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), in response to a petition from Indian tribes and environmental groups this year recommended that Congress declare the Snake River sockeye "endangered." Following the legal process will take another year before any action is taken to save the species.

So Chaney, a tall, laconic Missourian who runs a natural resources consulting business from his country home west of Eagle, has helped file suit to force NMFS to take emergency actions now. By emergency actions Chaney means restructuring the way federal dams are managed to allow smolts — the juvenile salmon — to swim from the headwater streams of Idaho to the sea.



ED CHANEY: *"I don't want the sockeye to have gone extinct for nothing."*

But Chaney does not believe the emergency actions will help the sockeye at all. They are gone. "I don't want the sockeye to have gone extinct for nothing," he explains. "I hope to force NMFS to force the Corps of Engineers to get on with fixing those main stem dams. It's too late for the sockeye, but it won't be too late for spring and summer chinook salmon."

The eight federal dams on the Columbia and lower Snake Rivers are the primary cause of salmon death — and extinction — says Chaney. (This does not include the Hells Canyon dams, which have no fish passage facilities at all.) While the eight dams were built with fish ladders to allow upstream passage of returning adult salmon, no provision was made for the smolts to pass downstream. The smolts have been dying by the thousands upon thousands as they pass through the dam turbines.

More recently, the Corps of Engineers has been trapping the smolts and piping them into barges and trucks which carry them past the dams, releasing them downstream of Bonneville Dam. Chaney argues that this solution is a failure. "We do everything but hit them in the head with a hammer," he says of the collection and piping procedure. "Then we put them in a barge and haul them for two days. It's a wonder that *any* of them make it back."

While driftnet fishing, overgrazing and overlogging all contribute to salmon mortality, Chaney says that nothing will help the salmon until "We get the fish through the reservoirs before their biological clock runs down." This means dropping the reservoirs for two months each spring so that a river-like current once again flows through them, and modifying the dams to allow the smolts to pass.

Eventually, says Chaney, the sockeye and the wild fall chinook, which he believes is also doomed, will be reintroduced to Idaho streams. Fish from Oregon and Washington streams will be released in the Middle Fork Salmon, the Secesh, the Clearwater — "to start the slow process of adaptation all over again." He thinks it will take decades, perhaps centuries, for the transplanted fish to adapt and evolve.

Chaney is banking on another evolution — people's changing attitudes toward rivers.

Rivers, says Chaney, "are a kind of history book." When agriculture was dominant in Idaho, "rivers were looked at as having a single purpose — to get the water out of. There was no restraint — you take it all. Times have changed, but the old laws and attitudes haven't yet.

"I love fish for their intrinsic value, but their real value is to leverage the way we use and think about rivers. The fish are the lever to get river protection that will benefit all: water quality and water quantity."

Chaney charges the Bonneville Power Administration, electric utilities and Corps of Engineers have fought every attempt to restore salmon. Asked why, he responds, "It's not the money. The utilities are monopolies who'll make the same no matter what. And the federal bureaucrats will make the same. In fact it's going to cost more over the long haul to restore the fish. The irony is it'll cost them 10 times as much because they won.

"It's a religious thing," says Chaney. "They believe the highest and best use of rivers is to generate power."

It's also a religious thing for Chaney, who says, "My earliest memories are being in a johnboat floating rivers. We're attracted to rivers — and it's not all commerce. They provide us something psychologically we need." □

GLENN OAKLEY PHOTO