

DeFazio's Devolution

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After I'd heard that a hedge fund manager was spending big bucks in 2012 to convince voters to toss out Democratic U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, I wrote a check for thousands of dollars to DeFazio for Congress. I was terrified that Republican candidate Art Robinson would pillage the public's forests, waters and wildlife. It turns out I should have also feared the incumbent on that score.

No politician behaves as we would like 100 percent of the time and DeFazio's lifetime rating with the League of Conservation Voters is a generally laudable 90 percent. However, a national rating doesn't reflect the actions a member of Congress takes on federal matters limited to his state or congressional district.

DeFazio's response to his smallest election margin in 14 general elections was to ally with Republican Rep. Greg Walden to craft legislation that would effectively privatize 1.7 million acres of western Oregon federal public forestlands, limit the applicability of the Endangered Species and Clean Water acts and nullify the National Environmental Policy Act for those lands. Citizens would not be able to sue over harmful timber sales.

Beyond the pale for a progressive and populist Democrat, DeFazio's bill received yes votes from only 17 Democrats when it recently passed in the House. Two of Oregon's other three House Democrats voted no. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley say no bill like that will pass the Senate, and the White House has threatened a veto if it does. Democrat DeFazio is cavorting with the most anti-environmental of Republicans. He seeks to give away federal public lands worth \$8 billion to \$10 billion to become chainsaw and bulldozer habitat.

The DeFazio-Walden bill would place federal public forestlands in a trust to maximize logging revenues. Half would be managed on industrial rotations of about 40 years, and half on a 100-year rotation — just before the age when a forest begins to take on old-growth character. All of the land would be clear-cut, save for a minimal buffer along streams. DeFazio says his stream buffers are better than those required under the Oregon Forest Practices Act (no lower regulatory bar exists), but they would be half of what is now mandated under the Northwest Forest Plan. DeFazio's bill would harm salmon runs.

DeFazio said on the floor of the House, "Of the 2.8 million acres [affected by the bill], 1.2 million acres of old growth will be preserved." That is patently false. While DeFazio's bill would transfer about 976,000 acres of BLM holdings in western Oregon to the Forest Service, much of it could still be available for logging. Rather than including language in his bill to actually protect those old-growth forests, his bill would establish a commission to determine which subset of old growth would get protected. If DeFazio wanted to actually protect old growth, he could have simply legislated such.

Yes, his bill would designate 76,400 acres of BLM lands as wilderness and as wild and scenic rivers, but at the expense of 23,000 acres of new clearcuts annually. DeFazio would transfer lands along Fall Creek and around Mount June and Hardesty Mountain on the Willamette National Forest to his timber trust. His legislation would increase clear-cut logging in the Eugene and Springfield municipal watersheds, increasing treatment costs to water customers.

A political benefit of all this is that timber barons may not give money to a potential DeFazio challenger.

Designating wilderness areas in one's own congressional district is an accurate barometer of conservation credentials. DeFazio's predecessor Jim Weaver was responsible for more wilderness designations in his 12 years in Congress than DeFazio has achieved in his 27 years. DeFazio may think he represents a timber-dominated district today; Jim Weaver really did. Yet Weaver also thought of future generations and not merely of his next election.

When Weaver left Congress in 1986, DeFazio and two others vied in the Democratic primary. Most progressive organizations sat out the election as all three had comparable views on their causes. However, a small political action committee I was associated with sent a mailing saying DeFazio would be the best choice. He won that primary by a few thousand votes. Today, almost any Democratic politician would be better than DeFazio.

Some of my liberal Lane County friends say DeFazio is preferable to Art Robinson, who is, after all, bat-shit crazy. The problem with that calculus is that DeFazio is increasingly doing bat-shit crazy things — like squandering our legacy of public lands in his district and state — using up credibility that comes from not always having been totally bat-shit crazy.

Perhaps liberals who make up DeFazio's political base can be pacified by his work on other issues of importance to them, including environmental ones (he's taken a recent increased interest in imperiled wolves, none of which have made it back to the 4th District and probably won't before DeFazio leaves office). However, DeFazio recently voted to allow motorized vehicles in wilderness areas and to prevent the Environmental Protection Agency from vetoing water-quality-damaging projects, and he opposed cap-and-trade legislation, which at the time was the only politically viable opportunity to address climate change. DeFazio opposes removing salmon-killing dams on the Snake River. Yes, DeFazio still gets lots of cheers when he marches in the Eugene Celebration parade, but the cheers are for the old greener DeFazio, not the new browner one.

What will DeFazio be remembered for? Besides a record tenure as an Oregon member of the U.S. House, it all might add up to a pedestrian bridge named for him that he himself pork-barreled, 23,000 acres of new clear-cuts annually, more expensive drinking water for people, dirtier streams for fish, extinct species and squandering billions of dollars of federal assets. DeFazio certainly won't be remembered for a legacy of wilderness for this and future generations, as was his predecessor and as almost any likely successor will be.

If DeFazio's campaign treasurer has read this far, I'd like my money back.

About the Author >



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For Kerr's detailed analysis of DeFazio's conservation record, go to andykerr.net/defazio.

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