

Some Hunters Plan to Desert Bush

Outdoorsmen Are Among
One-Issue Voting Blocs
That May Prove Crucial

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CIMARRON, N.M. -- Larry Dwyer, Oscar Simpson and Alan Lackey are lifelong Republicans who voted for President Bush in 2000. They agree with many of the president's policies.

But they won't be voting for Mr. Bush this year, they say. All three are elk hunters who spend much of the year anticipating outdoors vacations in New Mexico and Colorado. They argue that the administration has bad conservation and wildlife policies that threaten what is dearest to them: public hunting grounds.

"It happens to be my biggest issue," said the 48-year-old Mr. Dwyer recently as he and his companions rode on horseback through a valley in the Carson National Forest in New Mexico. Elk season here started Oct. 1.

The three represent a small group of hunters, fishermen and other outdoorsmen who are considering leaving their Republican roots this year. In this closely fought election, they are part of a larger wave of one-issue voters who intend to cross party lines for their cause, along with Democrats who support the president's aggressive stance on terrorism and economic libertarians who dislike his conservative stand on social issues. Each may represent only a small sliver of the electorate -- but in an election this close, such slivers could turn out to matter.

With 11 days until Election Day, the race between Mr. Bush and Democratic Sen. John Kerry is dead even. For Mr. Bush, the foundation of his standing all year long has been exceptionally strong support within his own party; a recent [Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll](#)¹ shows about 91% of Republicans saying they intend to vote for Mr. Bush. The poll shows about 85% of Democrats planning to vote for Mr. Kerry.

Given the tight contest, both sides need to keep in place solid support, prevent defections and persuade those who should be in a candidate's category to turn out in big numbers.

That is where the fight for groups such as outdoorsmen comes in. Mr. Kerry, seeing an opportunity, yesterday dressed in a camouflage jacket and cap, grabbed a 12-gauge shotgun and went on a well-publicized goose-hunting outing

in battleground-state Ohio in an effort to bolster his image as an outdoorsman who is comfortable with guns despite his party affiliation -- and woo swing voters.

Bush aides say they are confident that some Republicans who criticize Mr. Bush over land-use policies now will nonetheless support him on Nov. 2. "The president himself is an outdoorsman," says Jim Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, and the president's chief environmental adviser. Referring to Mr. Bush's conservation work on his Texas ranch, he adds: "The president practices what he preaches."

Some outdoor enthusiasts don't see it the same way. At the Outdoor Adventures Hunting and Fishing Show in Albuquerque last February, the New Mexico Wildlife Federation asked 600 sportsmen about their election choice in 2000 and their plans for November. Nearly half said they wouldn't vote for Mr. Bush in 2004, even though most said they had done so in 2000.

In Florida, some Republicans disagreed with Bush administration efforts to allow oil drilling off the state coast; the plan was abandoned after public outcry. In the West, some complain about the proliferation of natural-gas drilling rigs on grazing lands they lease from the federal government.

"What's turned me off on Bush is that he is trying to force his way into wild places that should never be industrialized," says 52-year-old Karl Rappold, a rancher on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, a spectacular meeting of mountain and prairie where the administration has pushed for drilling. Though the administration has stopped work on that plan, Mr. Rappold says he will vote against the president -- as will his wife, their five grown children and at least two other relatives, he says. He says they all voted for Mr. Bush in 2000.

Sen. Kerry is open to attack from some Democratic-friendly groups who say he is too extreme in his environmental-protection stands, taking positions that would crimp economic growth and cost jobs. Recently, the Bush campaign released a statement from Jerry Hood, former special assistant on energy at the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, declaring: "John Kerry and John Edwards have forgotten their records of supporting job-killing extreme environmental regulations, but the union workers whose jobs he put on the line won't be as forgiving."

Both sides have sought to use land-use concerns as wedge issue in local campaign stops. Mr. Connaughton notes that in May 2002, the Interior Department, at the president's urging, spent \$115 million to buy back undeveloped energy leases off the coast of Pensacola, Fla.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kerry told local fishermen on a recent trip to Louisiana that he would do something about the problem of eroding marshes, which reduces the habitat for fish.

In New Mexico, one of the top concerns for some outdoorsmen is the administration's push for more drilling for natural gas on postcard-pretty lands. In the northwestern corner of the state, for example, thousands of new wells have sprung up in the public lands of the San Juan Basin since 2000, stirring conflict with local ranchers who have government leases to graze their cattle on the public lands.

So far, the drill bits haven't dug into the Valle Vidal, where Mr. Dwyer and his hunting buddies took their recent ride. About two years ago, **El Paso** Corp., of Houston, filed a request with federal officials to explore coalbed-methane drilling in the Valle Vidal, which was donated by the former **Pennzoil** Corp. to the Carson National Forest 20 years ago. When local hunters learned the forest service was assessing the valley for drilling, they joined with local business and environmental groups to try and fight it. An El Paso spokeswoman says if the company is allowed to drill in the area, it will do so in an environmentally sensitive way.

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