

February 20, 2011

Recommended Reading for Republicans

The administration last week released a sweeping [report](#) recommending many useful steps for conserving, even expanding, America's open spaces and making them more accessible to the American people. It is the sort of document destined to gather dust on bureaucratic shelves unless someone pays attention and follows up.

Congressional Republicans are making it impossible not to pay attention. Their budget resolution and the destructive amendments attached to it not only challenged the very premise of the report — that protecting wild lands from commercial development is essential to a nation's physical and emotional health — but also some of the important weapons that make that possible.

The report takes its findings from more than 50 public sessions across the country organized by senior officials like Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Tom Vilsack, the agriculture secretary. It says that increasing development threatens open spaces and wildlife habitat everywhere, and draws special attention to the need to protect places near big cities, like the Hudson River Valley, as well as dwindling farmland almost everywhere.

These and other recommendations will require greater collaboration between government agencies and private landowners (70 percent of the land in the lower 48 states is in private ownership) — and, in less budget-constrained times, the expansion of existing conservation programs, particularly those for farmers.

The greater priority now is to save those and other programs from the Republican assault. President Obama's budget for next year rightly asks for full financing of the \$900 million Land and Water Conservation Fund, the government's main instrument for buying threatened open space. Last week, House Republicans reduced financing for this year to less than one-third that amount, leaving the Senate to salvage the rest.

There was other damage the Senate must repair. One amendment would prevent the Bureau of Land Management from recommending permanent wilderness protections for public land. The president's authority to designate new national monuments under the Antiquities Act survived by a slim margin, but some Republicans vowed to challenge that authority later this year.

In a perfect world this report would be required reading among House Republicans. Sadly, their headlong dash to weaken the nation's environmental protections would appear to leave them little time for it.