

Tri-Valley Herald

5/30/06

## **Tough challenge confronts Pombo**

**Endangered Species Act is becoming major issue**

By Rebecca F. Johnson, STAFF WRITER

*Editors note: This is the second part of a two-day series on the candidates for the 11th Congressional District. The Democrats were featured Monday.*

After several fairly easy attempts to clinch the incumbency, Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, is facing perhaps his most challenging quest to hang onto his congressional seat.

Pombo, the chairman of the House Resources Committee, has found himself on the receiving end of attacks and allegations from numerous groups — namely environmental — that question his integrity and ties to special interests and disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

"The primary has been more high-profile than it has in the past," Pombo said. "I'm a committee chairman. I'm a big target."

The biggest curve ball, however, was when former Congressman Paul "Pete" McCloskey Jr. moved from Yolo County to the 11th Congressional District with the sole purpose of defeating Pombo, who is seeking an eighth term.

One of McCloskey's main reasons for campaigning to return to Congress is Pombo's attempt to rewrite the Endangered Species Act, which McCloskey co-authored.

"To me, the Endangered Species Act is a valuable thing," McCloskey said. "To him, it's a bar to development."

Fellow Republican candidate Tom Benigno, who identifies himself as a "perennial candidate" and made unsuccessful bids for Tracy City Council, governor and congressman, also criticizes Pombo for taking on the act.

"The Endangered Species Act was really a platform for developing property and drilling for the big oil people," he said.

Pombo argues that the rewrite is necessary and includes requirements to recover species.

Pombo critics vocal

Nevertheless, the Endangered Species Act is a key issue that some groups point to when discussing the congressman's record.

"He's not just a congressman. He's an anti-environmental activist," said Kieran Suckling, policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity, which has spent the past several years fighting Pombo's efforts to revise the act.

"Most of the congressmen we oppose have a much more reserved attitude. Pombo believes ... that the government exists to give him a platform for his agenda."

Exhibits Nos. 1 and 2, critics say, are two Resources Committee's Web sites, one on the Endangered Species Act and the other on Earth Day, which coincidentally McCloskey served as co-chairman of when it was first established in 1970. Both explore various "myths" of the environmental movement.

Pombo's office says they are "part of the policy debate." But critics contend the sites improperly cloak Pombo's personal views with the authoritative — and taxpayer-funded — seal of a government Web address.

"It's propaganda," said Eric Antebi, a spokesman for the Sierra Club, who said the talking points come straight from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "There's no attempt to actually look at the facts."

But has the congressman been effective? The one forum between Pombo, McCloskey and Benigno earlier this month focused largely on Pombo's record, with some justification.

Pombo has proven adept at moving his agenda through the House, such as the energy bill.

But many of those measures have apparently been too radical for the more moderate Senate, which has either never considered the bills or shot them down.

Meanwhile, the environmental movement is more focused and charged since the infamous James Watt was running President Reagan's Interior Department, thanks to Pombo's blustering.

That's a bittersweet blessing, Antebi noted, as much of that energy is devoted to defeating Pombo's "crazy ideas."

"There's no reason in this day and age why we should have to expend effort to stop a congressman from trying to sell off land in Yosemite (National Park) to mining interests," Antebi said. "Yet we did last fall."

But the congressman is wholeheartedly supported by other groups, such as the California Farm Bureau Federation. Kiran Black, manager of political affairs, said Pombo understands the challenges facing the state's farmers and ranchers and supports common sense and reasonable solutions.

Black said Pombo has also worked across the aisle with other representatives and helped bring attention to local and statewide issues, such as the vulnerability of the Delta levee system and the need to secure funds for repairs.

"He's been a very effective representative for his district," she said.

McCloskey also criticized

McCloskey is not immune to criticism, either.

Some constituents and Jewish leaders have raised concern about McCloskey's past chairmanship of the Council for the National Interest — which he said argues for a Palestinian state — and his appearance at an Institute for Historical Review conference in 2000. The institute, while it claims to pursue a "revisionist view," is widely considered to have a membership that denies the Holocaust occurred.

"I'll speak to anybody," McCloskey said. "I was assured by the director of the institute they don't say that the Holocaust didn't happen, but they've got a lot of people in that group that would like to say the Holocaust never happened."

