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## Pombo's getting his taste of fame

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FOR HOLLYWOOD SUPERSTARS, there may be no such thing as bad publicity. But for U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, a Tracy rancher and the lone Bay Area Republican representative in Congress, the latest string of events must sting like horsefly bites in August.

Consider these chunks taken out of his political hide: The House shut down last week Pombo's production of mass mailings issued from his seat as Resources Committee chairman that lauded Bush policy. Lawmakers slapped a \$5,000 postage cap on all committees and tightened advance review rules. Pombo was spending \$50,000 a year.

News flash: Pombo's staff portrayed the vote as an exoneration while Democrats took a victory lap around the Capitol.

Pombo's smiling face appears with that of embattled House Majority Leader Tom DeLay on a Washington, D.C., watchdog group's Web site, JackInTheHouse.Org. The site features members of congress that have collected cash from lobbyist Jack Abramoff, currently the subject of multiple criminal investigations related to his work for American

Indian tribes.

Abramoff donated \$7,000 total to Pombo's campaign and RICH PAC shortly after the congressman became chairman of the Resources Committee in 2003. The contribution is not particularly unusual, as the committee oversees tribal issues.

To pour gas on the political fire, Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, asked Pombo last week to initiate a House investigation into Abramoff's alleged involvement in the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. In addition to Indian tribes, the Resources Committee oversees U.S. territories.

It's not illegal, as long as the relative performs actual work and receives a market-rate salary, but most candidates don't do it because, frankly, it looks bad.

To be fair, none of the Pombos on the payroll collect enough cash to live high on the hog.

A Contra Costa Times' analysis of campaign data provided by consultant Dwight Morris & Associates shows that the congressman has paid his wife, Annette Pombo, \$91,275 since 2001 for clerical and fund-raiser work. Randy Pombo, his brother, has earned \$284,950 in the past four years for his work as campaign

manager and treasurer, roughly \$71,000 a year.

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-San Jose, continues to hammer Pombo in hearings and in letters about his decision to grant a month's paid leave to committee staff just prior to the presidential election.

"I remain hopeful that Chairman Pombo will take the time to answer all the written questions in detail about the policies and practices of the Resources Committee to reassure that tax dollars are being spent in a legal, fair and ethical manner," Lofgren said on the House floor Wednesday.

News accounts earlier this month revealed that Pombo's staff, under the congressman's signature, asked Interior Secretary Gale Norton to suspend interim rules for wind turbines.

But staff failed to disclose that Pombo's parents pocket royalties from windmills on their Altamont Pass ranch. The staff also didn't mention that activists unhappy about the number of golden eagles killed by the Altamont turbines have appealed Alameda County's decision to extend wind farm permits, including the Pombos'.

Again, Pombo broke no laws. There's

no proof that the rules would have hurt his parents' income. And even if they would have, the law says elected officials may not use their power for personal gain; it doesn't extend to relatives.

So, should Pombo appear before the ethics police and submit to 1,000 lashes with an Alameda whipsnake?

Or is he the victim of targeted ire from those who fear he grows closer each day to success in his 14-year campaign to alter the cornerstone of environmentalism, the Endangered Species Act?

Definitely the latter, says Pombo spokesman Brian Kennedy.

As proof of Pombo's effectiveness, Kennedy points to bipartisan support for two major bills that came out of his committee last year, the Healthy Forests Initiative and the Calfed water deal.

At this rate, environmentalists will become irrelevant, Kennedy gleefully predicts.

"Chairman Pombo knew full well when he took this job, which deals with some of the most polarizing issues in Congress, that he would have to take incoming fire," Kennedy says. "If he wasn't so successful at the job, no one would be paying him this much attention."

Oh yeah, that's it, chuckles Kieran Suckling, with the Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson, Ariz.-based group whose ideology is as far from Pombo's as you can get and still remain on Earth.

Reached via cell phone Thursday in Washington, D.C., Suckling described a strategy meeting earlier

in the day at which environmentalists from around the country assessed Pombo.

"We're happy if Pombo's leading a bill because that's a good indication that it's probably not going anywhere," he says. "He's viewed as an extremist and not many people want to jump on his ship."

Forget Hollywood. Thanks for joining us in Washington, D.C., where all versions of reality are welcome. Bring your own horseflies.