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Conservation Group, Unions Joining Forces

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Saving Habitat, Ensuring Access Sought

By Blaine Harden

Washington Post Staff Writer

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SEATTLE -- In a first-of-its-kind alliance that could fundamentally reshape the environmental movement, 20 labor unions with nearly 5 million members are joining forces with a Republican-leaning umbrella group of conservationists -- the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership -- to put pressure on Congress and the Bush administration.

The Union Sportsman's Alliance, to be rolled out in Washington on Tuesday after nearly three years of quiet negotiations, is to be a dues-based organization (\$25 a year). Its primary goal is to increase federal funding for protecting wildlife habitat while guaranteeing access for hunters and anglers.

The unlikely marriage of union and conservation interests comes at a time when the Bush administration, with its push for oil and gas drilling in the Rocky Mountain West, has limited public access to prime hunting and fishing areas on federal land. This has triggered a bipartisan backlash from sportsmen and conservation groups, as well as from Western politicians in both parties.

The strength of that backlash is making bedfellows of blue-collar workers and old-guard conservationists, who historically have shared little but suspicion and disdain.

"We can make the union movement and environmentalism compatible and not antagonistic," said Tom Buffenbarger, president of the International Association of Machinists. "As of late, an awareness has grown that our goals are the same. We want good air, clean water and access to the outdoors."

Jim Range, chairman of the board of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, which includes most of the nation's mainline hunting and fishing groups, said his organization forged an alliance with the unions in large measure because of their manpower, money and lobbying savvy.

"It opens up a tremendous amount of territory for us to work on the both sides of the aisle," Range said. He predicted that the alliance will create a sudden and historically unique influx of millions of new people to the cause of land conservation.

The American environmental movement, created and run by upper-middle-class professionals, has tended to look down its nose at blue-collar workers and their tastes in outdoor recreation, said Thomas R. Dunlap, a professor of history at Texas A&M University and an expert in the history of environmentalism.

"This alliance with unions is certainly something quite new," he said. "If it really takes off, it may have a major effect in reshaping the environmental movement for this decade."

Eric Smith, a professor of environmental politics at the University of California at Santa Barbara, describes the alliance as a "huge deal" and a "political breakthrough" that will put substantial pressure on Congress to protect large tracts of federal land, especially in the Rocky Mountain West.

"It is a real creative step in cutting across party lines," Smith said. "It is likely to be a very effective strategy."

Several senior union officials said they wanted to join forces with conservation interests because they are concerned about the declining percentage of unionized employees in the U.S. workforce. They see the alliance as a way to excite and involve blue-collar workers who are passionate about hunting and fishing.

Together with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, the 20 labor unions -- most of them in the building trades -- recently commissioned a poll that found that 70 percent of union members hunt or fish. As important, 72 percent of those polled said they are concerned about the loss of good places to do either. The poll also found that about a quarter of union members said they belonged to the National Rifle Association, an affiliation that displeases some Democratic union leaders.

The NRA in recent years has been strongly allied with the Republican Party and the Bush administration. Some union leaders say they want their new alliance with conservationists to lure the political allegiance of gun-owning union members away from the NRA and its political agenda.

"We know that the NRA is communicating to our members what clearly are anti-union positions and urging them to support anti-union candidates," said Harold Schaitberger, president of the International Association of Fire Fighters.

Schaitberger said the alliance with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership "is about connecting with our members, doing good conservation work and offsetting some of these anti-union messages they are getting from the NRA."

Richard Trumka, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO and an enthusiastic supporter of the new alliance, said an additional 33 labor unions in the AFL-CIO may soon join up.

"This is a way for unions to reconnect with workers in another portion of their lives and meet a need that they have," Trumka said. "It is also going to give the conservation movement a lot more muscle."

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