

The Greens' Ground Zero: A rural Republican is targeted by the environmental left.

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To accurately gauge the level of desperation in the environmental community at any given moment, simply murmur the words "Richard Pombo." Then step back and watch the slurs roll.

Ground zero in the nation's environmental fight has already been established in California's 19th district, where Mr. Pombo—a Republican who narrowly lost his House seat in 2006—is again running in the Central Valley. It's only April, but the green shock troops are again waging an all-out smear campaign to defeat him, this time with an assist from one of his Republican primary competitors. It's a vivid example of the stakes for the green agenda in this year's midterm elections.

Regulatory wins aside, it's been a bleak 15 months for the environmental left. President Obama's election was supposed to bring a climate-control regime that would finally give greens the tools to dismantle our industrial society. Instead, scandal has left climate science in tatters. The recession has sent the majority scurrying away from a comprehensive cap-and-tax bill. Some Democrats are embracing legislation to curtail the EPA's planned carbon regulations.

Their campaign in the balance, enviros shudder at Mr. Pombo back in Washington. For 14 years—four heading the House Resources committee—the rancher was the GOP's sturdiest voice on private property rights, energy exploration and environmental reform. Even as the Bush administration ducked the fight, Mr. Pombo pushed for drilling and for the modernization of failed laws like the Endangered Species Act. Greens decreed him Public Enemy No. 1.



In 2006 they launched the most coordinated, expensive attack in their political history. The Defenders of Wildlife Action Fund, the Sierra Club, the League for Conservation Voters, and CREW (a George-Soros-funded front that masquerades as a public "watchdog") spent \$2 million-plus on vicious ads, mailers and door-to-door campaigning. Helped by a Democratic gerrymander that pushed Mr. Pombo's 11th district into liberal San Francisco suburbs, Democrat Jerry McNerney won. The effort was a warning to other Republicans—and it worked. Aside from oil drilling, the GOP has largely skirted green issues, for fear—as members put it—of being "Pombo-ed."

Now Mr. Pombo is back, running in retiring Rep. George Radanovich's neighboring 19th district, nearly overlapping his original seat. Should Republicans regain the majority, Mr. Pombo could be right back at Resources, the fate of greens' climate agenda in his hands.

Democrats have faint hope of winning the conservative 19th, so the action is in the June 8 GOP primary, where Mr. Pombo is running against three competitors, including state Sen. Jeff Denham and former Fresno Mayor Jim Patterson. The district, like all the Central Valley, has high unemployment thanks to green assaults on its natural-resources industries. An environmental lawsuit has led to a crippling water shut-off. These are issues Mr. Pombo won on in the past, and yesterday he reported a huge \$463,000 in fund-raising for the first quarter.

In response, environmental groups are slinging the same smears as they did in 2006. Some \$7,500 in past campaign donations from Jack Abramoff (which Mr. Pombo gave to charity) have been distorted into Mr. Pombo's "close ties" with the convict. It's traditional for new Resource chiefs to tour national parks. In 2003 Mr. Pombo saved the taxpayers \$20,000 by driving an RV to sites rather than taking jets. Family members are allowed to accompany congressmen, and Mr. Pombo paid his family's costs. Environmentalists morphed this into a "corrupt" Mr. Pombo charging citizens for a "family vacation."

Defenders of Wildlife has already spent \$64,000, some on robocalls that state "Pombo was accused of violating federal bribery laws." The line was so outrageous that the Fresno Bee—no Pombo fan—felt obliged to report "No law enforcement agency or legislative ethics committee ever accused Pombo of violating federal bribery statutes, or any other laws, during his 14 years in the House of Representatives. He was never identified as a target of a law enforcement investigation."

"They've turned off our water, shut down our forests, stopped our mining, are after our grazing—they've hit every industry important to this district," says Mr. Pombo. "They'll say anything to win."

Mr. Pombo is also getting it from his main GOP rival, Mr. Denham, who has linked arms with the very greens that have decimated his district. The Denham campaign sent out a memo in March feting a "push poll" designed to spread the Pombo accusations far and wide. It featured such lines as: "87% of voters are less likely to vote for Pombo when they learn he billed taxpayers for his vacation." Reached by phone, Mr. Denham, who is best known in California for helping Democrats pass their rich budgets, didn't distance himself from the accusations. "If he's done none of these things that he's accused of by liberal groups as well as conservative groups, then he ought to say so," said Mr. Denham.

The race has already so devolved that GOP Rep. Devin Nunes, also of the Central Valley, took sides in the primary, a rare step, endorsing Mr. Pombo. He wrote an op-ed rapping Mr. Denham and calling the attacks "lies—a dishonest smear campaign run by extremist groups and funded by wealthy liberal operatives." Mr. Nunes views the race as vital if Republicans are to push back against radical greens. "These groups have threatened me, too" he says. "They are ruining people's lives."

The primary is, in fact, an early indication of what rural Republicans and Democrats face in fall campaigns from a community frantic to keep its agenda rolling. Just how emboldened greens are will partly rest on the results of the Pombo primary.