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Tide turns for ecogroups

Environmentalists advance their agenda as voters' priorities evolve

By John Ingold
The Denver Post

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(Ed Andrieski, The Associated Press)

These are happy times for the environmental movement under the dome.

As the legislative session begins its second half this week, every one of the the dozen bills the groups have identified this year as priorities is still on the road to passing.

The bills touch areas of state policy from water use to power generation to wildlife protection. Two are awaiting the signature of the governor, who, by the way, doesn't seem to go a day without mentioning the "new energy economy." That phrase was at least partially created by the environmental community.

Both chambers of the legislature also have "pro-

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conservation majorities," as the environmentalists put it.

"There are many Democratic constituencies that have influence under the dome," said political analyst Eric Sondermann. "But my perception is that the environmental constituency is first among equals."

So, these days green means go at the Capitol. But why?

Environmental lobbyists say that, after years of getting their bills killed in Republican legislatures, their ideas have gained wider appeal in a world of rising gas prices and greater acknowledgment of climate change. They credit voters for bringing to power the current crop of conservation-minded lawmakers — mostly Democrats but also several environment-friendly Republicans — who in turn have looked favorably upon the environmental agenda.

"It really has been a pretty incredible shift," said Carrie Doyle, the executive director of Colorado Conservation Voters. "I think what's leading this shift are voters' concerns."

Environmental leaders say they also have become more politically skilled in recent years. They work to build coalitions more often, with farmers, ranchers, hunters, fishermen, local elected officials, business owners — anybody who might have an interest in land or water.

They shoot more for incremental change. And they are more willing to compromise on issues to see at least part of their goals enacted.

"I think it's fair to say we're getting better at what we do," said Elise Jones, the executive director of the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

None of this is to say that the environmental groups don't have their detractors. Some at the Capitol have taken to half-jokingly calling the environmental community the "granola Mafia" for the forceful way it approaches its issues.

Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, called the environmental community the "900- pound gorilla" of the legislative session and said some of the community's ideas are detrimental to the state. He pointed to the current rewriting of the state's rules for the oil and gas industry, which the industry has said will hurt communities that depend on the industry.

"All of us want to protect the air and the water and the land," Gardner said. "We just don't want to sell Coloradans down the river to get there."

"They are a narrow interest in my opinion," added Sen. Josh Penry, R-Grand Junction, "that in many instances doesn't represent the majority of Colorado."

But conservationists say they are working for the good of all of Colorado.

"We fight hard for everything we get," Jones said. "We feel we're doing a good job. We're not all-powerful."

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