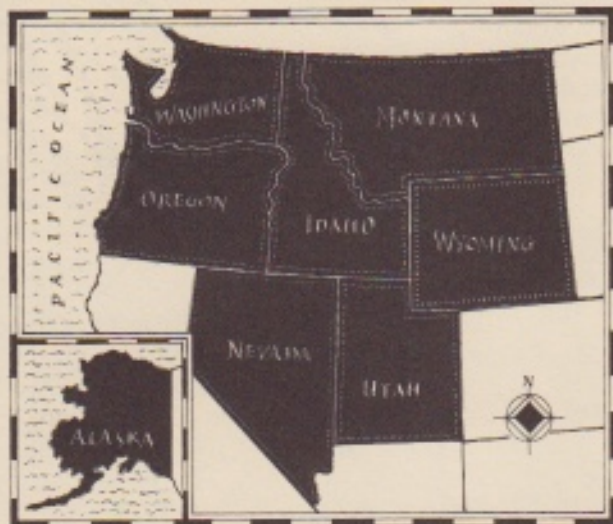


Big challenges, small victories and missed opportunities

Legislative sessions in review

by Maya Muir

No surprise: the results of recent legislative sessions in our region are mixed. The Right continued to attack the ability of government to regulate and administer natural resources, public access to meetings and records, labor, affirmative action, and reproductive rights, yet they were not always successful. Some bad legislation was held at bay, and some small gains were won.



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Reproductive rights

Right-wing activity was most virulent in Idaho, where three anti-abortion bills were proposed: two to expand consent, one against "partial birth" abortions. Bad as the legislation was, more alarming yet was the tone of the proceedings. "It was the ugliest session ever," says Jen Ray, director of the Idaho Women's Network. "The extremists were out in force, conservative legislators were trying to out-conservative each other, and with a lame-duck pro-life Governor, leadership collapsed."

Nevertheless, one parental consent bill was withdrawn, and although the second passed, the Governor vetoed it — a real victory. The "partial birth" bill passed, but it may well be overturned in the courts. A bill limiting late trimester abortions passed in Alaska, but elsewhere reproductive rights emerged unscathed — most notably in Utah, where for the first time in years no restrictions were passed.

Women and children

Despite right wing dominance of the legislature, the Idaho Women's Network, Idaho Citizens' Network, and others secured several bills strengthening child support provisions and funds for children's health insurance. On the other hand, in Utah a bill granting tuition tax credits for parochial and private schools and home schooling passed, and childcare was deregulated. And in Alaska, bills narrowing the definition of marriage and women's rights after divorce were enacted.

Labor

Anti-labor "paycheck protection" bills were proposed in three states. For the fifth year the measure was defeated in Utah, but it passed in Wyoming, and will be on the November ballot as an initiative in Nevada. The Wyoming bill affects only PAC donations, leaving dues untouched, but the national AFL-CIO calls the Nevada initiative the worst in the nation. "It would be an accounting nightmare, and unions would have to pay all court costs and attorneys' fees in facing legal challenges," says Danny Thompson, political director of the Nevada State AFL-CIO. The Nevada initiative requires a constitutional amendment to be made law. It would need to be passed in two elections; this November will be its first test.

Also in Nevada, an attempt to secure the right to collective bargaining for state employees went down to defeat. The eight-hour day is under attack in Alaska.

On the positive side, a package of bills attacking the teachers' union in Idaho was defeated, and in Washington, although a bid to raise the minimum wage (unchanged since 1988) was killed, the State Labor Council is sponsoring an initiative to that effect for November that is rating well in polls.

Civil rights and communities of color

The challenge to Washington State's affirmative action policy coming on the November ballot is one of the most closely watched issues in the region. "It would close the doors of the university and equal opportunity to people of color — and many others," says Eric