

# DAILY INTER LAKE

## Candidates Offer Differing Views On Public Lands

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Throughout Montana's abbreviated special-election campaign, Republican Greg Gianforte and Democrat Rob Quist have both worked to claim the mantle as the most outdoors-y contender for the at-large U.S. House seat, playing to an electorate that places a high value on public land access and the state's diverse offerings of rugged, wild spaces.

And while they share a propensity for shooting TV sets in campaign commercials, they offer different views on stewardship of public lands and the environmental laws that govern them.

Along with Libertarian candidate Mark Wicks, the two candidates presented their positions on natural-resource and environmental policies during separate interviews with the Daily Inter Lake last week.

Both Quist and Gianforte have repeatedly denounced proposals to transfer any federal public land to state ownership, a move that some worry could result in states then selling those lands off to private interests.

Wicks is the only candidate to openly support such land transfers, suggesting that they could be linked to mandatory easements to ensure continued public access in the case they are sold.

Quist's support for public lands and his opposition to those proposals have been consistent notes he's sounded throughout his campaign. He has sought to draw a distinction with Gianforte on that issue, attacking his opponent's history of donations to groups that support public-lands transfers, notably the Property and Environment Research Center. The Republican has defended his contributions as targeted to other endeavors by those groups, which also include the Heritage Foundation and Americans for Prosperity.

"In the case of PERC, we supported an entrepreneurship program they were running," Gianforte told the Inter Lake.

The Republican added that he would never support the controversial land-transfer proposal — now or in the future.

But he joins many other Republicans in the state that have called for increased local authority over federal land management, particularly on the state's vast federal land holdings controlled by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

"I do think that when Montanans have a seat at the table in management of lands, we get a better result," Gianforte said. He cited categorical exclusions under the Farm Bill as a local-control program he hopes to expand.

Both he and Quist stated their support for collaborative management projects developed by competing interests. But the Democrat remained skeptical of divesting too much decision-making power from the federal agencies, arguing that those policies could pave the way for future federal-land transfers.

Quist added that he strongly supports the proposed return of the National Bison Range back to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

“I think that is one that would need to go forward. They have a relationship with the bison that goes back centuries,” Quist said.

With Republicans now in control of the Oval Office and both chambers of Congress, there’s been growing talk on Capitol Hill of enacting changes to the Endangered Species Act, a landmark environmental law that since 1973 has guided the process for protecting plant and animal species facing possible extinction.

While conservation groups point to the act as a success story, noting nearly 100 percent of species listed under the law have been thus far spared from extinction, some Republicans have argued it creates a major barrier to resource and commercial development, along with public land access.

Quist counts himself as a defender of the law, pointing to the adverse impacts to wildlife as human population pressures have continued to reduce available habitat.

“We have to really be willing to defend our habitat for our wildlife. That all comes back to public lands. To me this is what makes Montana so special,” he said, adding he would not support reforms to the law “at this time.”

Wicks and Gianforte again aligned on the issue. Both said they would work toward making species more difficult to add to the list and loosen the requirements for de-listing.

“We should be working to prevent the extinction of any species in Montana, but ... I do think we ought to look at this,” Gianforte said, calling proposed rules for protecting sage grouse in eastern part of the state an example of “federal overreach.”

In Northwest Montana, perhaps no species has generated more controversy than the grizzly bear, which has since 1975 retained federal protections under the law despite substantial rebounds in the populations centered around Glacier and Yellowstone national parks.

Quist said he would not currently vote to de-list the species. Both Gianforte and Wicks would, and cited growing conflicts between grizzlies and humans in areas like the Rocky Mountain Front.

Both Gianforte and Wicks see Montana’s federal forest lands as overgrown and poorly managed, and believe that timber harvest has suffered mainly as a result of “frivolous lawsuits” waged against the Forest Service by environmental groups.

Some lawmakers have in turn proposed reforms to the Equal Access to Justice Act, which requires the government to pay litigation costs for those groups when they prevail in court — seen by some as incentivizing lawsuits to block logging projects.

Gianforte said while he supports the intent of the law, he also backs proposals to require those groups to post a bond to cover the federal agency's expected court costs for defending the suit. He also suggested that nonprofits be subject to an "asset cap" under the law, meaning they would not be compensated for court costs if their assets are above a certain threshold.

"That's a simple reform. The intent of the act is to help people without resources," Gianforte said. "Some of these environmental groups have hundreds of millions of dollars."

Wicks largely lined up with that view, suggesting a reduction in the amount that groups are compensated under the law.

"I think if we changed the compensation amount, per hour, for their lawyers, I think they'd be a lot less likely to sue," he said.

Quist entertained the idea of requiring bonds for organizations suing over federal timber projects if they haven't participated in collaborative groups that developed them, but again urged caution.

"Some of those provisions need to be revisited," he said.

The decades-long decline in the coal industry and regulations intended to rein in carbon emissions and help curb climate change have profound implications for Montana, which has some of the country's largest coal reserves.

Gianforte has in part campaigned on his desire to roll back regulations and support coal-dependent communities like Colstrip.

"The climate is always changing," he responded when asked whether he believes human-caused carbon emissions are driving climate change. He also referred to a report by the conservative Cato Institute that found a negligible impact on climate change from U.S. coal plant emissions.

Gianforte also believes the renewable-energy industry has been given too many incentives relative to those provided for fossil fuels.

"I'd be a fan of similar incentives for the coal industry to reduce carbon emissions," he said.

Quist didn't spell out any policy specifics regarding energy production, but argued that the United States needs to move away from coal and fossil-fuel consumption. The Democrat said he would support policies to increase renewable-energy development in Montana, yet also said the industry is "already pretty well-subsidized."

"I think we have a huge potential for wind and solar in our state," Quist said. "... At the same time, we have to recognize that coal is a big economic driver for our state. We can't pull the rug out from under workers in that area."