

Gianforte: 'I believe we can develop natural resources and protect the environment'

Tom Kuglin

April 29, 2017

Greg Gianforte's face lit up as he reminisced about trips to the backcountry with his family.

As he and his wife Susan raised their children in Bozeman, Gianforte chose to take three-day weekends through July and August while working at his former company, RightNow Technologies. On Friday mornings they would leave from a trailhead, hike to an alpine lake, summit a peak and return home Sunday.

"No cellphones. No TV. Just God's creation in the wilderness area," he said. "It was fabulous for our family and I'll tell you, in our kids it instilled a certain resiliency that I don't know how you get any other way."

While Gianforte, the Republican candidate running to replace newly confirmed Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke in Congress, makes a personal case for his connection to the outdoors as a Montana way of life, how those values mesh with his proposed policies is an admitted balancing act.

"I believe we can develop natural resources and protect the environment," he said. "We need to find that balance – too often it's just one side or the other."

Gianforte ran as a job creator and sportsman in his failed bid for governor last year. Now as he takes on Democrat Rob Quist and Libertarian Mark Wicks in a May 25 special election, he continues to advocate for jobs in timber, coal and recreation – all important aspects of the Montana way of life, he says.

Gianforte's support of hunting and the Second Amendment earned him an endorsement from the National Rifle Association.

"The NRA is honored to endorse Greg Gianforte and appreciates his support of the Second Amendment," NRA-PFV Chairman Chris W. Cox said in a statement.

Gianforte takes a hard line against the sale or transfer of federal lands.

"Public lands brought me to Montana and I've been very, very clear: public lands have to stay in public hands," he said, rattling off a list of big game animals he and his family have hunted on public lands. "From a conservation perspective we need to be working to increase access to our public lands."

His stance against public land transfer puts Gianforte at odds with the Republican Party's national platform, and regardless of the outcome of Montana's election, Republicans will control the U.S. House of Representatives.

Gianforte says he believes in many aspects of the platform, but "no two people agree on everything," and land transfer is one. When asked about how he will be effectively opposing his own party, he pointed to negotiating contracts with RightNow, saying "you don't do that without finding common ground."

He describes his approach as akin to a football game, looking for 3- to 5-yard plays to advance an agenda.

As a means of promoting public land access, Gianforte supports reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The program uses royalties from offshore drilling as grant funding for conservation, including land acquisition.

Access to public waters and lands became a hot topic during the governor's race, when Gianforte's detractors attacked him for suing the state of Montana in 2009 over an easement on his Bozeman-area property.

As a wealthy Montana transplant, Gianforte was painted as a rich out-of-stater locking the public out of land they had a right to access. At a seminal moment of the campaign, Gov. Steve Bullock pulled the lawsuit out of his pocket during a televised debate and read from it.

Gianforte said the dispute resulted from a government mistake regarding the location of the easement, and it was resolved with a handshake before the state was officially served. He dismisses the incident as "much ado about nothing."

"I moved past it a long time ago. The question is, did the message get out? I don't think the story ever got told," he said.

The story, he says, is one of frustration at the state's response or lack thereof over 18 months. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks agreed within an hour of meeting at the property to move the easement to the correct location and the lawsuit never went forward.

"This was a shot over the bow so they'd return our phone call," Gianforte said.

The public was never stopped from using other access points during the dispute, he said, adding that he supports Montana's stream access law.

The lawsuit continues to be a major campaign issue as the state marches toward a May 25 election. It is often on the lips of Quist, who lists public lands and access as his top issues and is among those hoping the issue again hampers Gianforte.

"When Gianforte tried to shut down our stream access, people here took it personally. In fact, Montanans' emphatically rejected Gianforte this November for his anti-public lands and anti-stream access agenda. Gianforte is out of step with Montana values and now he wants a U.S. Congressional seat as a consolation prize," Montana Conservation Voters board chair Juanita Vero said in a statement.

With the announcement this week that the U.S. Department of the Interior will review two decades of national monument designations, including the Missouri River Breaks in Montana,

Gianforte likely finds himself again at odds with access and conservation groups who want the lands and public access protected.

Gianforte's campaign manager says he supports the Trump administration's review, echoing often-levied criticism of the designations as federal overreach. "(Gianforte) believes these designations need to be scrutinized and made with local support. Any decision must take into account the concerns and impact of the people living in that area."

Gianforte takes a similar stance on land protected as wilderness, not saying if he would support any new wilderness designations but not dismissing the idea, either.

"It's very important to hear the voice of the community on these things," he said.

In the case of a proposed mine on the outskirts of Yellowstone National Park, Gianforte came out opposed, he says after speaking with people in Emigrant.

Access to public lands for Gianforte includes motorized access and management of non-wilderness federal lands as multiple use. Too many gates have gone up on Forest Service roads, he says.

"I'm not advocating for ATVs in wilderness areas but plenty of other areas allow them with that multiple-use mission," he said, adding that he believes travel plans have tilted toward non-motorized access. He gave the example of the Forest Service closing motorized access for "wildlife safety" as federal overreach.

"When did it become the federal government's job to manage non-endangered species in our state? I thought it was FWP that did that," Gianforte said. "This is the sort of overreach that is making people livid because it's taking away their way of life."

Access also means access to commercial timber and other natural resources, he says, and he would like to see reforms to public land management and potential reforms to the Equal Access to Justice Act aimed at reducing environmental litigation.

Gianforte did not name specific land management reforms he would like to see, but did say the way federal forests are currently managed is not working and not in the best interest of Montanans from a health and safety standpoint.

Gianforte would like to see more collaboration on forest projects and pilot projects that would test more state and local management and federal lands.

Gianforte did name some specific reforms he potentially sees for Equal Access to Justice Act, which pays attorney fees when private citizens or groups successfully sue the federal government. The law is not limited to environmental litigation, but is often associated in the West with legal challenges to timber sales and other land management.

"I'm not blaming the agencies as much. It's the system we set up and the lawsuits and the revenue stream we've created for these environmental extremists," he said.

Potential reforms include pro-rating reimbursements based on the number of successful points in a lawsuit and extending asset caps to nonprofits. Payments currently are capped based on a business or individual's financial need.

Gianforte stops short of asking for full repeal of the law, saying the goal of Equal Access is a good one.

Often associated with Equal Access to Justice is the Endangered Species Act, the latter also drawing the ire of some conservative lawmakers looking to develop natural resources. Gianforte would like to see some refinements to the ESA as well.

Recovery of species – such as sage grouse, which narrowly missed listing under the ESA – needs to include specific population targets, he said, and local input needs to be more readily considered.

“I think we make better decisions when they’re made locally here in Montana by Montanans,” he said.

On the potential delisting of the grizzly bear in an area bordering Yellowstone National Park, Gianforte says he believes science should be used to determine a healthy population. “And I’ll probably be one of the first ones to apply for a tag,” he added about a potential grizzly hunting season.

President Donald Trump has proposed a number of funding cuts to departments managing lands and natural resources in Montana, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Gianforte says he supported an initial hiring freeze and believes in a generally smaller federal government.

“Let’s face it, our federal government is bloated,” he said.

One program he would push to continue funding is Superfund under EPA, which cleans up industrial and mining waste sites across the country including more than a dozen in Montana. The federal government must “cut spending, but do it in a way that doesn’t hurt Montana,” he said.

Among the proposed EPA and other agency cuts are for climate change research and programs.

“First off, the climate is changing,” he said, agreeing that humans affect the Earth. But he said that throwing away 7,000 jobs in Colstrip and shutting down coal-fired power will have a negligible effect, citing EPA data.

Gianforte attributed that same information to EPA data in an interview earlier this month with Montana Public Radio. Later, his campaign told MTPR that the data came from a study done by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, not the EPA.

Gianforte did not have specific ideas on how to address climate change, but sees a general need to “bring common sense back to these policies and where there is a real legitimate threat to the environment, we ought to consider policies to mitigate it.”