

Greenwire

THE LEADER IN ENERGY & ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY NEWS

AN E&E PUBLISHING SERVICE

CAMPAIGN 2008: 'Friend of fish' faces fight in Md. Republican primary *(Friday, February 1, 2008)*

Lauren Morello, *Greenwire* reporter

One of the House's strongest Republicans on environmental and climate policy is in the fight of his political life.

Maryland's Wayne Gilchrest is facing two well-funded conservative opponents in the Feb. 12 primary in a race that even his supporters admit might be too close to call.

A Gilchrest defeat would be a major blow to environmental and conservation groups who have considered the nine-term lawmaker a rare Republican voice on their issues. In recent years, Gilchrest has co-founded the Congressional Climate Change Caucus, worked to reauthorize the Magnuson-Stevens fisheries measure and promoted bills to protect marine turtles, the Chesapeake Bay and expand the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.

But Gilchrest's opponents say he can be beaten.

Despite endorsements from national Republican leaders, including President Bush and House Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio, Gilchrest "is pretty vulnerable," said Nechama Soloveichik of Club for Growth, which is running TV and radio ads in support of one of his opponents, state Sen. Andy Harris. "I think over time his record has gotten even more liberal and ... the district is fairly conservative."

Also backing Harris: former Maryland Gov. Bob Ehrlich (R) and more than 20 of his current and former colleagues in the state Legislature. Gilchrest's other challenger is state Sen. E.J. Pipkin, who spent \$1.6 million of his own funds during his unsuccessful bid to unseat Democratic Sen. Barbara Mikulski in 2004.

Harris and Pipkin argue that Gilchrest's views on economic, security and conservation issues have drifted far to the left of his reliably Republican 1st District, but environmental and moderate Republican groups are taking the opposite tact -- betting that Gilchrest's support for ocean and climate change legislation will play well in an Eastern Shore district that hugs the Chesapeake Bay.

Harris "voted against cleaning up the bay," says the voiceover on a TV [ad](#) the League of Conservation Voters aired in the Salisbury, Md., media market last fall. "Because Andy Harris isn't from here -- just another Baltimore politician trying to be our congressman."

Other TV ads include a spot from Republicans Who Care -- a 527 organization formed by the moderate Republican Main Street Partnership -- that touts Gilchrest's support for the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, a 27,000-acre expanse of protected wetlands located on the Chesapeake just south of Cambridge, Md.

Meanwhile, another environmental group, California-based Ocean Champions, is running an Internet fundraising appeal that calls Gilchrest a "friend of fish."

As of Tuesday, the group had raised \$35,000 and was on track to meet its \$50,000 goal, with the money earmarked for a district-wide voter identification and turnout campaign to support Gilchrest in Maryland's Feb. 12 primary, said co-founder and President David Wilmot.

'A safe Republican district'?

Gilchrest's district includes the entire Eastern Shore and parts of Anne Arundel, Baltimore and Harford counties. Voters gave President Bush 57 percent of the vote in 2000 and 62 percent in 2004.

"It's a safe Republican district, so it's not a matter of a Democrat coming along who can beat Gilchrest," said David Wilmot, president of Ocean Champions. "The battle will always be in the primary."

But University of Maryland political science professor James Gimpel said the district's "reliable GOP" profile may be misleading.

"Environmental issues are actually pretty prevalent," Gimpel said. "That's one area where the district is a little more to the left than most other Republican districts would be."

That's likely an outgrowth of the role the Chesapeake plays in the area's growing tourism and recreation industries, he said.

"At one time, agriculture and food processing industries were more prominent," Gimpel said. "But over the last 30 years, the district has moved a little more to the left," because of population growth and the rise of tourism and trade that have eclipsed traditional agriculture to some degree.

Gimpel predicted that Gilchrest would eke out a primary win, and in doing so virtually assure victory in the general election.

"Gilchrest is someone that these Eastern Shore voters have come back to time and again. It's risky to throw out an incumbent like that," said Gimpel. "I gather that's why the Bush administration is trying to help him out. ... [T]hey'll actually tolerate a recalcitrant candidate who goes against them a lot to maintain the seat."

Running Harris or Pipkin against a Democrat could be a gamble, agreed Tony Massaro, senior vice president for political affairs at the League of Conservation Voters, which has endorsed Gilchrest in the primary fight.

"2008 seems to be a pretty topsy-turvy political year," Massaro said. "Who knows how voters are going to respond to Andy Harris if he's the nominee -- I think there is a distinct possibility that all those independent voters are going to look at his record on the Chesapeake and say, 'We don't want this guy in Congress.'"

Bush seemed to acknowledge as much in a mid-January letter to Maryland Republicans in which he endorsed Gilchrest, stating that his re-election "is important to regaining our Republican majority."

"Wayne has worked with me to reduce taxes on working families, and I look forward to working with him to make those tax cuts permanent," Bush's letter reads. "Wayne is also a strong advocate for the conservation and preservation of the Chesapeake Bay area. This past October, he was with me when I visited the bay area."

Still, conservative GOP groups are going all out in the lead-up to the primary. Club for Growth, which also endorsed Gilchrest's primary opponent in 2002, has launched a Web site, www.waynegilchrestisaliberal.com, headlined by bold black text that proclaims, "Gilchrest Votes With Pelosi 61% of the Time."

Tight money race

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the GOP contest's closeness is the large amount of money in play.

According to the latest Federal Election Commission filings, Harris hauled in \$529,000 through the third quarter of 2007, reporting a total of \$402,000 cash on hand.

In contrast, Gilchrest raised \$174,000 through the same period, combining that money with funds left from his 2006 campaign for a total of \$402,000 cash on hand. In December, he announced he was reversing his long-held stance on PAC money, accepting such contributions for the first time since 1993.

No fundraising data were available for Pipkin, who entered the race shortly before the December filing deadline.

But according to a poll Pipkin's campaign released in late December, 60 percent of likely Republican voters held a negative opinion of Gilchrest, compared with 36 percent who said they approved him and 29 percent who said they would vote to re-elect him.

And in a head-to-head matchup between the three GOP candidates, 33 percent of those surveyed said they

would vote for Gilchrest, compared with 27 percent each for Harris and Pipkin.

Conducted by McLaughlin & Associates, the poll included 300 likely Republican primary voters in the district and has a 5.7 percent margin of error.

Those supporting Gilchrest admit that the race is a nail-biter. "This is a pretty tough race when it comes to Republican primaries," said Kirk Walder, spokesman for Republicans Who Care. "We have internal polling and I think it shows the race is going to be close. ... You have a primary that is three-way, with Harris spending so much money, and Pipkin spending so much money."

LCV's Massaro said he also believed it to be a three-way race -- with a caveat. "How strong either one of the challengers is running is not particularly clear to me," he said.

Challengers attack each other

One X-factor may be the brewing battle between Harris and Pipkin, who have started attacking each other in ads and mailings, perhaps setting up a situation where they split the conservative GOP vote, observers said.

For his part, Pipkin has begun to play up his record on Chesapeake Bay issues to differentiate himself from Harris.

"E.J. Pipkin got involved in politics because of his love of the Chesapeake Bay," proclaims the candidate's Web site, which states that Pipkin "helped organize and lead a massive grassroots campaign" to stop the dumping of dredge spoils into the fragile waterway.

The strategy is misguided, said Harris campaign manager Chris Meekins.

"In a Republican primary, voters focus on fiscal issues, the war in Iraq, terror and immigration," he said. "Because [Gilchrest and Pipkin] are not good on the main issues important to Republicans, they are talking about secondary issues."

And voters who hold environmental issues as a primary concern are not likely to be swayed by Pipkin's campaigning on Chesapeake protection, said Judith Stribling, a wetlands ecologist at Salisbury University and president of Friends of the Nanticoke River. "I'm sure he has some track record, but Wayne's is exemplary," she said.

"I think it's curious that most of the people like me who are Democrats still want to see Gilchrest stay in his seat," Stribling added. "There is a level of trust and respect he has created there that goes beyond the party."

Want to read more stories like this?

[Click here](#) to start a free trial to E&E -- the best way to track policy and markets.

ABOUT GREENWIRE

Green wire is written and produced by the staff of E&E Publishing, LLC. The one-stop source for those who need to stay on top of all of today's major energy and environmental action with an average of more than 20 stories a day, Green wire covers the complete spectrum, from electricity industry restructuring to Clean Air Act litigation to public lands management. Green wire publishes daily at Noon.

E&E Publishing, LLC 122 C St., Ste. 722, NW, Wash., D.C. 20001. Phone: 202-628-6500.

Fax: 202-737-5299. www.eenews.net

All content is copyrighted and may not be reproduced or retransmitted without the express consent of E&E Publishing, LLC. [Click here](#) to view our privacy policy.