



CAMPAIGN 2008: Oceans group targets suddenly vulnerable S.C. Republican *(Friday, October 31, 2008)*

Allison Winter, Greenwire reporter

A California-based advocacy group is working to defeat the top Republican on the House committee that oversees marine fisheries and oceans issues, branding him "oceans enemy No. 1."

Rep. Henry Brown of South Carolina, ranking member on the House Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans Subcommittee, is in a tough battle for a fifth term. His 1st District seat, which represents a stretch of coastline from Myrtle Beach to Charleston, has been in Republican hands since 1981.

A recent poll by a Charleston, S.C., television station showed Brown with a narrow lead, 50 percent to 45 percent for Democrat Linda Ketner.

Seeing an opportunity to pick up a seat held by Republicans since 1981, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has placed the race in its "red to blue" campaign.

The Democrat is also being helped by an environmental group, Oceans Champions, which endorsed Ketner last week and is contributing to her campaign and funding print ads asking voters to "Turn thumbs down on Brown."

"If Henry Brown is re-elected, I would expect his victory margin to be in the single digits," said William Moore, a political science professor at the College of Charleston, in an interview yesterday. "[Ketner] has an outside shot at winning the seat, but this is a district that the DCCC did not target as winnable early on."

The rush of support for Ketner, a lesbian who is in her first run at elective office, is surprising in a conservative district where Democrats usually manage to get about 35 percent of the vote, Moore said. George Bush won 59 percent of the district's vote in the 2004 presidential election.

Moore attributes Ketner's success to an effective, organized and well-financed campaign that has saturated the airwaves with attacks on Brown and commercials selling the Democrat as a fiscally conservative candidate with traditional values. Ketner has been able to bankroll the campaign in part with financing from her business ventures and those of her father, the founder of the Food Lion supermarket chain.

"Her commercials are some of the best I've seen in congressional elections, and she had the deep pockets where she could compete," Moore said. "So we have an openly gay Democratic woman running for a seat with a chance of winning it."

One of Ketner's ads blasts Brown for his involvement in a 2004 fire that started on his property that burned 20 acres of the Francis Marion National Forest. The matter made national news after Forest Service whistleblowers said the agency delayed ticketing Brown because he threatened a congressional review of the agency's work. The ad accuses Brown of using his influence to avoid a fine and to make it harder for future offenders to be prosecuted.

Brown's campaign has called the ads "misleading" and asked for them to be taken off the air. Brown had a burn permit for the fire and has paid the \$5,000 fine for allowing his fire to spread, according to his campaign.

"Her attacks are just a continuation of a negative campaign that is trying to divert voters' attention away from her ultra-liberal record," said Rod Shealy, Brown's campaign manager.

Shealy said that his polling shows that Brown's lead is increasing daily. Brown's campaign ads have criticized Ketner for being "too liberal" and opposing offshore oil drilling.

'Oceans enemy No. 1'

Oceans Champions' endorsement of Ketner is partly a positive response to her positions, but partly because the group loathes Brown.

"When we talked to Linda Ketner, we were very impressed and confident that she would have the ability to step up and be a champion, if you will, for our oceans," said David Wilmot, the president of the group. "The second issue was what Representative Brown has done and not done as a member of Congress -- looking at his record, it is very clear he has been an ocean enemy, if you will.

"This is an opportunity to try to defeat him and put a much better person in office," Wilmot added.

Oceans Champions made 32 other endorsements in Senate and House races across the country, five for Republicans.

As ranking member of the Fisheries and Oceans subcommittee for two years, Brown has used his post to speak out in support for offshore drilling and aquaculture. But it was Brown's response to a sweeping oceans conservation bill last summer that infuriated environmentalists.

Advocacy groups had been pushing for the OCEANS-21 legislation for three years. It would formally authorize the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, offer guidelines for regional coordination and ecosystem planning, and create a new "national oceans adviser" for the president.

Brown said the "OCEANS-21" bill might go too far in its quest for oceans health and create too many hurdles for aquaculture, natural gas development and dredging projects.

Brown and other Republicans had 17 amendments lined up for the legislation, many of which would have struck entire sections of the bill.

"That by itself is enough to put him on our list," Wilmot said.

None of the amendments passed, and the subcommittee approved the bill, 11-3. The legislation never went to a vote in the full committee or reached the House floor, in part because of concerns that it would become a vehicle for a larger debate over offshore drilling.

Island development

Environmental groups also opposed a bill Brown introduced last July that would have made it easier for new development on a barrier island near Charleston. That proposal is the focus of the print **ad** from Oceans Champions that is scheduled to appear in the Charleston newspaper this weekend.

The bill would remove 84 undeveloped acres on Kiawah Island from the Coastal Barrier Resources System.

Congress created the coastal barrier program in 1982 to discourage development on barrier islands from Texas to Maine. Development is still allowed on land inside the zone, but the property is not eligible for federal flood insurance, making homeownership there much more risky.

Kiawah is a posh resort. The bill would have removed insurance restrictions for the island's undeveloped southwestern end, where developers have plans for 50 houses. Brown said he introduced the legislation at the request of island residents.

The Oceans Champions ad criticizes Brown for the proposal, which the group characterizes as a threat to the coast. It says: "Linda Ketner promises to advocate on behalf of South Carolina's coastal communities and to protect the oceans."