

Tiny Capitola environmental group works to shape November elections

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David Wilmot's view from his second-story office spans a small swath of Capitola's coastline. His eye, though, is on a wall map in the corner of the San Jose Avenue building that charts political races across the nation's seaboards.

Unlike cable-news pundits who roll out similar red- and blue-state maps to keep tabs on who will win the presidency or which party might pick up seats in Congress, Wilmot is calculating which races will have the greatest consequence for the health of the oceans.

As head of the young political group Ocean Champions, the 47-year-old La Selva Beach resident will channel tens of thousands of dollars and the backing of affiliates across the country into what he sees as the nation's most pivotal environmental fights this November.

The support may go toward the defeat of a high-ranking conservative, as was the case in the 2006 re-election bid of former California Congressman Richard Pombo, known for his efforts to weaken the Endangered Species Act and other environmental protections. Or it might go to the aid of a lesser known Republican like Florida Congressman Connie Mack, who has supported research on red tides and efforts to restore wetlands.

"Protecting our oceans is not a partisan issue," Wilmot says.

The stakes are particularly high for Wilmot this year as the November elections approach and offshore oil drilling moves to the fore of the nation's political debate.

"Drilling certainly gets people motivated and excited, and it's an important issue" he says. "But we're careful not to pick one issue as a litmus test."

In addition to drilling, Wilmot is looking at how candidates stand on Oceans 21 — a major piece of conservation legislation now moving through Congress — as well as their positions on fisheries management, pollution prevention and funding for marine protection.

Last week, Wilmot's group decided on nine candidates to throw support behind, with another 20 or so forthcoming. They range from almost certain winner and longtime environmentalist Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, to more vulnerable candidates with mixed records like Rep. Chris Shays, R-Conn.

"Is Shays perfect on every issue? No. But he's good on a lot of them," says Wilmot, whose decision-making is underscored by the pragmatism of leveraging limited contributions for the greatest benefit of the ocean.

Ocean Champions was launched in late 2003 when Wilmot, a marine biologist by training, and a colleague, Jack Sterne, who practiced law in Alaska, decided their commitment to ocean protection would be best served through politics.

Four years later their nonprofit, which is organized as both a political action committee and independent 527 tax-exempt status, has invested nearly a half-million dollars into getting ocean-friendly candidates elected — through direct candidate funding and financing of pro-ocean campaigns in competitive districts.

Support for the now three-person organization comes from hundreds of dues-paying members nationwide.

"We don't win all the races," said member Carol Davis of Aptos. "But impacting the race is only part of it. The other impact is the relationship."

Davis says aligning with candidates early in their careers goes a long way to advancing ocean protection in the long run.

Farr says the organization is having an impact on Capitol Hill.

"Ocean Champions brings a grass-roots mentality to the ocean community and does a great job at it," Farr said. "We need more groups that approach policy with this very realistic point of view."

For information on Ocean Champions, visit www.oceanchampions.org.