

New Interior Secretary is an Old Hand When it Comes to Western Water Issues

By Dan Keppen

The U.S. Senate confirmed Dirk Kempthorne as the new Secretary of the Interior on May 26th by a vote of 85-8. The following Tuesday, May 30, marked the first official day in office for the new Secretary. And it didn't take long for Kempthorne to make his presence felt.

Within hours of being freshly confirmed by the Senate, staff members Secretary Kempthorne were on the horn, contacting western water interests with news that President Bush's newest cabinet member wanted to speak with them.

On the evening of his first day, I had the pleasure of participating in teleconference call with Secretary Kempthorne and a dozen other water and power interests from the Western United States.

Kempthorne managed to squeeze the call in between a host of other activities that marked his first day, including meeting with other interest-group leaders, shaking hands with tourists at the base of the Washington Monument, and introducing himself to Interior employees. All the while, he nursed the foot he broke the week before when he stumbled on broken pavement while jogging.

As a former senator and governor of Idaho, Kempthorne is familiar with Western water issues, and he played a key leadership role in the Nez Perce Agreement, a model that he would like to see employed in other areas of the West. On the conference call, he mentioned that, in recent meetings with Senate leaders prior to his confirmation hearing, he heard many comments about the need to find answers for Indian water rights claims, to provide additional resources for aging water infrastructure, and to understand the role of surface storage.

After a brief prepared statement, Secretary Kempthorne fielded questions on the Colorado River agreement, the CALFED Bay-Delta Program, and hydroelectric power matters. Family Farm Alliance President Pat O'Toole – who runs a cattle and sheep ranch along the continental divide in southern Wyoming - addressed the “very scary” drought conditions in Colorado and Wyoming, and the impact that new development is having on traditional farming operations.

“Without developing new water supplies, growing western water demands are going to take water away from agriculture,” O'Toole told the Secretary.

Kempthorne agreed, and stated that he is “a real advocate of storage, through aquifers and other means.”

Kempthorne said that somebody needs to feed the world, and that, without water, the United States will no longer be the country that can fill that role.

“American agriculture must remain strong,” he said.

Kempthorne has publicly stated that during the next 30 months, he wants to settle litigation over management of Indian trust accounts, complete modernization of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and advance plans for water conservation and developing alternative energy. He has already been criticized by some environmental groups and urban papers for his unabashed commitment to modify the ESA through legislative and/or administrative means.

"I am intent upon saving species," Kempthorne told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee during his confirmation process. "I am not content with this 'triage,' where you simply say they're endangered and then move on to list the next species. I will always ask, 'What are we doing to actually restore the species instead of just listing them?'"

Kempthorne played a key role as a senator in the mid-1990s to pass compromise ESA legislation with the Clinton administration. That bill made it out of committee before running into opposition from both sides. He vowed to take similar action, this time as a member of President Bush's cabinet. He believes part of his mission is to rekindle the atmosphere of bipartisan conversation on the topic of ESA.

"I'll look forward to again being at the table discussing ways to improve the act and make it more meaningful in helping the very species that we are trying to save," he told the Senate committee.

Kempthorne also has considerable experience balancing the needs of wildlife and the economic vitality of Idaho during his six-year stint as governor.

With that said, Secretary Kempthorne is no Pollyanna. The paths to water supply enhancement and ESA modernization will not be easy ones: if they were, something would have been done a long time ago. However, it is encouraging to see someone in his position charge out of the gates and show that he is willing to roll up his sleeves and get the job done.

Time will tell if his enthusiasm and political skills will lead to desperately needed improvements to western water supply infrastructure and changes to a law that is over 30 years old.