national scene

McClure yields to Reagan in supporting DOE extinction

Sun. June 13, 1982

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

U.S. Sen. James A. McClure's backing of merging the Department of Energy with the Department of Commerce was an obvious disappointment to most leaders in the eastern Idaho nuclear community.

James A. McClure

McClure had told this writer in a number of interviews he would oppose dismantling the department but when the showdown came he even stepped up front at a White House ceremony to say he would support the legislation that would abolish the agency.

McClure emphasizes the step calls for only a merger, not abolishment, but it's apparent functions of the Department of Energy will occupy a subservient role in the business-oriented Department of Commerce, no matter what is said to sugarcoat the movement.

* * *

McClure, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, has always depicted himself as a warm backer of the newly-created Department of Energy. It was his long opposition that delayed any consolidation but when President Reagan began twisting arms, McClure was one of the first to capitulate. In his defense, there were some changes made from the original merger proposal to overcome some strenuous objections.

It is recalled that when McClure was in Idaho Falls earlier this year, Department of Energy executives sought to contact him after hearing about his opposition to dismantling.

It is significant, however, that U.S. Sen. John Tower, R-Texas, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, did not knuckle dowm. Instead he headed a group of senators who sent the administration a letter questioning whether Commerce was the proper agency to handle nuclear weapons production for the military. This is a function that makes up half of the Energy Department's budget, he noted. Tower complained the weapons program would be buried in the Commerce Department.

On the other hand, McClure's acquiesance is in keeping with his image of generally replying, "yes, Mr. President."

With McClure and several key Republicans dropping their objections, the Department of Energy had little chance of surviving in the Senate. Even the department's energy secretary, James Edwards has announced he plans to become president of the Medical University of South Carolina this summer.

* * *

McClure appeared at a White House ceremony May 24 to participate in presiding over the formal death of the Department of Energy.

He said at that time that the "proposal does not, I repeat, does not dismantle the Department of Energy and scatter it throughout the federal bureaucracy. This is a merger, not a dismantlement."

McClure contended the proposal would continue the purpose of the 1977 Department of Energy Organizational Act by maintaining all federal energy programs within a single organization structure. He added the legislation should not be viewed as a signal that the U.S. dependence on imported energy is over, nor as a signal that the nation does not continue to have a very serious energy problem.

The civilian energy programs are to be assigned to a new deputy secretary for energy, and the defense programs to another deputy secretary. The bill also would give McClure's committee a voice in considerng nominations for secretary of commerce and his principal deputy secretary.

Later, McClure dispatched another news release to correct a White House statement touting the department abolishment would cut 3,000 jobs. Not so, said McClure, the 3,000 cut are in some DOE programs in the 1983 budget, but in no way linked to the proposed merger of the two cabinet level departments. Rather, he explains, the merger would eliminate no more than 150 jobs in Washington and would have little effect elsewhere.

* * *

The entire Idaho Republican congressional delegation goes along with the DOE demise: McClure, along with Sen. Steve Summs and Reps. George Hansen and Larry Craig.

They specifically gave their support to the energy department elimination when asked.

The only top Idaho political energy department champion is Gov. John V. Evans, who said "I'm disappointed the president has insisted on moving in this direction. I thought furnishing the country with these valuable services should continue. In its present decision, it is not serving Idaho well for Bonneville County and the INEL. It will not strengthen that operation."

The DOE death, however, may be a little premature, no thanks to McClure or his fellow Idaho congressional members.

Wire news dispatches said prospects for passage of the legislation are less certain in the Democratic-controlled House where the plan has been rightfully attacked as a misguided policy that will leave the country in disarray when new energy shortages hit.