

McClure sees natural resource development

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The chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Friday predicted some significant developments the coming year in the entire natural resources and environmental field.

Sen. James A. McClure, R-Idaho, who Friday afternoon wound up a three-day appearance in eastern Idaho, said he foresees implementation of policies under the colorful Secretary of Interior James Watt that will tip the balance more in favor of natural resource development on the nation's public lands and against stringent environmental safeguards.

McClure confined his activities Friday to a tour of facilities at the Idaho National Reactor Testing Station after holding public meetings in Idaho Falls and Rexburg Thursday and speaking to the Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs and the East Idaho technical societies Wednesday.

McClure, who is the No. 3 leader in the Senate as the Senate Republican Conference (caucus) chairman, reaffirmed his support for Watt, who he contended is not radically departing from any policies but is only carrying out provisions of the law.

McClure complimented Watt particularly in the way he has acquiesced to state control over many public land policies, particularly the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation land.

He noted his directive announced at the Western Governors Conference at Jackson Sept. 11-12 reaffirmed state control of water and repudiated a so-called "federal non-reserved water right."

McClure also pointed out that Watt has slashed through red tape to hurry up the process of land exchanges. For example, all except 4,000 acres of the 38,000 acres have now been transferred to Idaho the last year after a lack of action for half a century.

"I think where Secretary Watt got in trouble at the start was his determination to not speak to the press for the six months he was in office so that he could get his own house in order," said McClure. "That gave the press a field day in sniping at him, without getting any responses."

"He wanted to make certain he had control over the Department of Interior and that he wanted to make some clear changes, without trying to smooth things over."

McClure contended that many of the changes taking place in giving the state more control would have happened even if there hadn't been a change of administration.

McClure said the tough wilderness question will be tackled the coming year.

He explained there are two separate Wilderness areas—Forest Service lands in RARE II and the BLM lands.

He noted RARE II study had been completed for over a year, commenting "we ought to make decisions now. The executive agencies have made their recommendations for Congress to decide."

He also said it appears there are only slight chances for the land and water fund. It got zero funding for the current fiscal year and prospects don't look much better for the new year, he said.

On a more optimistic note, he said prospects for a revision of the 1902 Reclamation Law look good the coming year.

He divulged a compromise may settle on what he called "a two-track" idea. This would give owners the option of owning up to 1,600 acres and leasing 1,600 more; or another option which is desired by Californians in particular of owning 160 acres as provided in the present law but leaving no limitation on the number leased.