Top Idaho Republicans regret resignation of James Watt

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All of Idaho's top Republicans Tuesday expressed regret at the resignation of Secretary of Interior James Watt, most favoring former Wyoming senator Clifford Hansen as a successor.

Sen. James A. McClure, R-Idaho, said he had avoided advising Watt earlier whether he should or should not resign. He said after Watt asked for his advice, he had said that was strictly up to him.

McClure rejected a suggestion of Gov. John V. Evans that he be considered to fill the post. He said that in his opinion Watt had administered the department and the public lands in a responsible manner. He added it was unfortunate that Watt was not judged on the job he was doing rather than on basis of irresponsible remarks.

Sen. Steve Symms, R-Idaho, said, "I regret the resignation. I feel that Jim Watt will leave a strong legacy on stewardship on government lands, in particular enhancing the country's energy independence through his strong support of the mineral and oil leasing programs.

"He also has enhanced the relationship between the Department of Interior and the states and the individual users of government lands."

Symms said he has asked the White House to appoint a successor who will continue to support the president's policies that Watt was carrying out.

Symms named former California congressman John Rousselot, Hansen and any other western-oriented conservative as his choices for replacement.

Said Rep. George Hansen, R-Idaho, "I don't think anyone was surprised. I have watched people make statements that were not very well phrased. But when some people like Watt make innonent statements, the vultures pounced on him. I think Watt was a victim of these sharks.

"I think in his defense, Mr. Watt is a really decent Christian genetlemen who I think would never intentionally offend anyone. The country is the loser. I'm sure Watt will find there is life after politics."

Hansen blamed the Washington news media for instigating much of the present controversy swirling about Watt.

"It is like a pressure cooker here in Washington because of the news media," said Hansen.

Hansen said he favored Clifford Hansen — no relation to him — as a choice to "carry on the same good management policies with regards to public land, and resource management. I think he would be entirely compatible with the president on how the Department of Interior should be run."

Hansen also said the Wyoming man would be in a strong position for Senate confirmation as a former U.S. senator. Hansen also pointed out that having lived in nearby Wyoming, Clifford Hansen "is fairly conversant to problems of the West and the Northwest."

The Idaho congressman also named New Mexico U.S. Rep. Manuel Lujan as another possible choice.

Idaho Republican Chairman Dennis M. Olsen commented, "I think the unseemingly way that Mr. Watt was forced out greatly overshadows his few unfortunate remarks. It is a sad day in American politics when a person of Mr. Watt's character and abilities is lost under such circumstances.

"I think this whole thing was a Washington-made crisis and the effect is to make people feel at little cynical. Those who are casting stones very probably are living in glass houses.

"I would hope a replacement could be found who would have the courage equal to Watt to not be deterred by the radical liberals and unreasonable environmentalists."

Olsen said he is not in a position at this time to indicate who the replacement might be but added that former Wyoming's Hansen would be high on the list of people to be considered.