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The political pulse

State sidelights . . .

BLM director kicked as political football

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The present controversy swirling about the beleagued Robert Buffington, Idaho director of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, reflects how political motivations can impair the efficiency of a top executive.

It was ironical to see both Buffington and Robert Bufford, the new national BLM director, acting so chummy at the recent Western Governor's Conference at Jackson, Wyo., as compared with their present adversary postures.

At that time they were attending the gathering, primarily because their top boss, the combative Secretarty of Interior James Watt, was on hand to woo the western governors. Alternately beaming and scowling Watt won over the western governors.

Three of the governors, Ted Schwinden, of Montana; Ed Herschler, of Wyoming, and Jay Hammond, of Alaska, questioned some of Watt's policies as encroaching of state rights. Schwinden and Herschler were irked over his restrictive national programs on coal and Hammond was less than pleased with Watt's extensive Outer Shelf oil exploration views. In the end, Watt, in an unusual generous gesture, acquiesed to wider state rights in important mineral and oil developments.

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The present situation has now become so political that it must be admitted the Buffington's effectiveness is seriously impaired. He is accused by some Idaho rancher as a political appointee of former Secretary of Interior Cecil D. Andrus, a charge he hotly denies. He contends he is a 25-year career veteran and his appointment came from the former national BLM director, Frank Gregg, not Andrus. He further states he took his directives from Gregg, not Andrus.

Yet, Burford, a prosperous Grand Junction, Colo, rancher, before taking over the BLM job, has now turned on Buffington in an obvious political ploy.

Of course, this is not hard to figure because Watt is now convinced that the Idaho ranchers — or at least the influential ones — want him ousted. Most of the protesting ranchers involved are from southwest Idaho, primarily in Owyee County. Watt's record shows that anything the ranchers want, they can have. As a result, the personable Buffington, only 51, has been served a directive to take a high level position at Washington or retire, with a decision to be on his desk by Nov. 16.

Burford explains he transferred Buffington because ranchers regarded him as a political appointee of Andrus.

Burford acknowledges he thinks Buffington could implement the new policies but that a political climate "exacerbated by the fact you have a former secretary who has very vocally criticized this department" reduced Buffington's effectiveness.

Buffington was transferred to Idaho from Arizona two years ago during the Carter administration when Andrus was secretary of Interior. About two weeks ago, Burford offered Buffington reassignment to Washington as assistant BLM director for land resources.

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The latest to jump into the fray is Rep. George Hansen, R-Idaho, who urges that Buffington accept the Washington post, rather than be sunk in a "political quagmire." Earlier Sens. James A. McClure and Steve D. McClure also entered the bickering, generally in support of Watt and Burford, and indicating favor for Buffington's ouster.

Buffington said he is undecided at present what to do, explaining he wants to know more about his Washington post as the assistant BLM land resource bureau director.

Under such an arrangement, he would be in close contact in the same office with Burford, a situation that understandly Buffington might find less than congenial.

In regards to Hansen's advise to take the transfer, Buffington answered with a light touch of sarcasm "I can say I appreciate Congressman Hansen's concern for my welfare; however, I must take exception to his comments. First of all, I'm not a political appointment. I am a 25-year veteran in civil services. Also I have been through seven administration changes."

Hansen also repeated Burford's assessment that "Buffington's problem in Idaho is that the high profile maintained by Andrus, former secretary of interior, has caused Buffington's position to become involved in a political whirlwind."

This statement was challenged by Buffington who said his national director at the time, Gregg, not Andrus, had asked him to move against his wishes as BLM Arizona state director in Phoenix to Idaho, to replace William Mathews, who was retiring. Although the government pays for the actual moving expenses, Buffington said it does not cover many other expenses associated with the move, such as exchange of homes, schools and other arrangements.

Buffington acknowledged he had served as trouble shooter for the BLM in other capacities and it was believed he could serve well in Idaho because Andrus as secretary of interior was from Idaho and it was considered a sensitive position.

Buffington said he received a letter from Burford giving him two choices: to take the position as assistant director for land resources at Washington or to retire, and to make this decision by Nov.16.

"I want to find out if it is political pressure why I'm being moved," he said.

Buffington said he also is studying the contents of a packet of 32 letters from Burford which allegedly were written by Idaho ranchers urging his removal.