The western scene

Western governors unite on mutual state problems

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

The recent Western Governor's Conference at Kalispell, Mont., demonstrated a desire by the governors to unite for solving western problems and also a mounting antagonism against Secretary of Interior James Watt.

All of the governors agreed they would keep in close touch with each other to discuss mutual problems, particularly in the field of public lands and agriculture.

Idaho's Gov. John V. Evans was given the most headlines for his sharp exchanges with Watt but actually the debates between Watt and New Mexico Gov. Toney Anaya and Montana Gov. Ted Schwinden were much more vitriolic.

Even the Republican governors privately expressed dismay at Watts' strong pro-development policies but understandably they kept their discourses at a low profile.

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The Western governors took a giant step in enhancing their powers by favoring the consolidation of two rival organizations. They are the Western Governors Conference and the Western Governors Policy Office, known as WESTPO. They will be renamed the Western Governors Association.

The governors agreed both organizations divided their efforts and diluted their power. It was agreed the consolidation will be worked out during the next year and be ready for a formal vote at the 1984 conference which is scheduled to be held in California for the first time as long as can be remembered.

WESTPO was created in 1976 to form an energy policy among Western states but it eventually resulted in controversy because some governors refused to join and other threatened to leave the WGC in favor of WESTPO. Evans leaned toward WESTPO, which apparently will hold its final meeting at Bismark, N.D, Aug. 18-20.

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Evans grabbed most of the headlines. He said he still was concerned because Watt, in his presentation, said one criterion to justify the land sale was that the money could be used to help balance the federal budget.

Evans said he objected to this and also to Watt's rejoinder that the he and the governors were in agreement on this, when in fact, they were far apart. Evans particularly objected to the executive order creating the Property Review Board. He said he did not agree with Watt in proposed disposal of BLM lands in Idaho next year, particularly 14,000 acres in southern Idaho.

A resolution unanimously supported by the governors, called for the governors to have a chance to review and concur with the disposal of any federal land.

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Aside from Watt and public lands, the Western governors were most concerned with boosting the power of U.S. farming, particularly in western states.

Washington Republican Gov. John Spellman said America is like a Third World country when it comes to agriculture, exporting its raw materials for processing elsewhere. He added Western farmers and ranchers should recognize their prosperity is tied directly to that of the rest of the world. He added that while most American agricultural exports go to prosperous nations, major growth in demand is coming from pooor nations.

He criticized eastern states for supporting world trade protectionism which is supposed to prevent foreign competition for American-manufactured goods.

Schwinden was elected the new conference chairman, replacing Oregon Gov. Victor Atiyeh, while California Gov. George Deukmejian was named vice chairman, even though he did not attend.