

Water agency merger now seems in trouble

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One of the most engrossing topics in the ornate marble capitol is the proposed merger of the environmental services of the Department of Health and Welfare with the Department of Water Resources. It has generated conflicting views.

It's one of the proposals strongly backed by Gov. John V. Evans, and in the House passage last week more Republicans voted for it than against.

In fact, it cut across party lines in the decisive passage of 42-28. It drew the aye votes of 29 Republicans and 13 Democrats and opposition of 21 Republicans and seven Democrats.

Arguments in the lower chamber centered on whether shifting the environmental services to the DWR would weaken environmental control or strengthen water development.

Probably one of the most humorous developments is aligning the environmentalists, including the League of Women Voters and the ultraconservatives, in the same bed, as opposed to the more moderate factions.

The vote in the House was an unusual coalition of House conservative and moderate Republicans and seven Democrats in opposition, reflecting the unholy division.

The environmentalist and ultraconservatives, however, are lined up together for entirely different reasons. The environmentalists believe the shift would harm environmental controls; the ultraconservatives fear it might weaken water development, and they are suspicious of any consolidations of agencies.

One of the favorite phrases is that it would put the foxes in with the chickens, whatever that means, but we don't know exactly which would be the chickens or the foxes.

Another rather unusual development is for the DWR, made up of 99 employees, to consolidate with Environmental Services' 104 staff members. It is assumed, however, DWR executives would be the bosses, with Environmental Services holding the subservient role.



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Talk water matters

BOISE — Reps. Walter E. Little, left, R-New Plymouth, House majority leader; and Vard Chatburn, R-Albion, chairman of the House Resources and Conservation Committee, talk water matters in the foyer of the Idaho House chambers.

Reed Hansen, Idaho Falls farmer and veteran vice chairman of the DWR's Advisor Board, contends the consolidation would not lower environmental standards in Idaho. He rejects the argument the merger would pit development and conservation against each other.

Hansen points out the two agencies by merger would present a united local approach in dealing with the federal government.

"I think this is the bottom line of the whole thing," he said.

He insisted this would help in wise development of resources, help prevent transport of water out of state, set guidelines for

instream flow, and give the Legislature full control over water action.

He also pointed out the two board members who are considered environmentalists, Franklin Jones, Boise, and Scott Reid, Coeur d' Alene, support the consolidation.

The LWV and environmentalists feel that with agricultural pollution a major problem in Idaho, many of the farmer legislators would favor having control programs placed in the DWR. They feel there is a philosophical conflict between protecting the environment and development of water resource projects.

Bruce Arnell, Idaho Falls, District 7 Health Department director, also expressed strong opposition. In a recent letter to the governor he contends the DWR has historically devoted its efforts to insuring that water is available and properly applied to agricultural land, rather than insuring that aquifers and water supplies are safe for consumption. He added the DWR shows its record of enforcing well drilling regulations has been with little regard

to the preventive health aspects of culinary wells.

The merger bill appeared heading for enactment, but the statement by the governor last weekend that it was a first step toward establishment of a superagency of Department of Natural Resources has changed the complexion.

The bill now rests in the Senate State Affairs Committee and is expected to undergo hearing early next week.

Sen. J. Marsden Williams R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the Senate Resources and Environment Committee, has no strong feeling but now appears leaning against the proposal.

His House counterpart, Rep. Vard Chatburn, R-Albion, chairman of the House Resources and Conservation committee, backed the merger in the House debate as one that would balance resource management.

He now opposes a superagency and said that if this plan had been known beforehand it would have been defeated.

Key senators now believe the bill is in deep trouble.