

The national scene . . .

Forest Service shift shows Andrus' power

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By BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

President Carter's reorganization plan for a new Department of Natural Resources reflects graphically the power Secretary of Interior Cecil D. Andrus enjoys at the national's capital.

Andrus, a former Idaho governor whose high popularity was such in 1974 that he amassed 72 percent of the popular vote over the formidable lieutenant governor, acknowledges Carter's announcement of last Thursday caught him by surprise.

In fact, in a Post-Register telephone interview a couple of weeks ago, Andrus said the reorganization plan was still on the back burner. He said he didn't know when it would be unveiled.

He did say, significantly enough, that he felt he enjoyed warm relations with the president, who very seldom interfered in the way the department is run, but called frequently on specific cases and policies for information.

In light of what took place, Andrus likely underrated his position with the president.

Andrus, of course, is immensely delighted at this turn of events. He has long advocated such a step, even when he was governor of Idaho.

He has been accused of being an empire builder and wielding too strong an environmental hand.

If the plan goes through, it would shift 22,000 permanent employees of the U.S. Forest Service from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and 12,800 of the Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration from the Department of Commerce. They would augment 55,000 Interior Department workers, bringing the total to 89,800 under his direct command.

This writer is not going to analyze the merits of such a merger at this time, except it does appear an excellent move to consolidate such agencies in a proposed Department of Natural Resources. At the very least, it would in Andrus' own words, avoid costly management duplications and reduce costs, which is what Americans want anyway.

In his statement to The Post-Register following the announcement, Andrus said he felt the American people would support a plan that would bring more efficiency in government and for well spent tax dollars. He said he felt the opposition "comes mostly from an entrenched constituency that likes the status quo," one that "serves narrow special interests."

Congress likely will receive the detailed specifics of the plan by the end of this month and then it will have 60 days to either approve or reject it. Andrus says he knows there will be difficulties encountered in such a drastic revamp.

Both of Idaho's U.S. senators who sit in the Senate Natural Resources and Environment Committee, which likely would have first crack at the plan, indicate approval but understandably want to study the plan.

Democratic Sen. Frank Church noted the Soil Conservation Service will be retained by the Department of Agriculture which in earlier discussions

had been mentioned for the transfer. He also expressed pleasure the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, rather than the Army Corps of Engineers, will be mainly responsible for dam construction.

Republican Sen. James A. McClure was almost as supportive, with the statement there may be some definite benefits in combining the land management, but he also wants a more careful study.

As could be expected, both of Idaho's Republican ultra conservative congressmen issued negative statements.

U.S. Rep. George Hansen thinks the transfer is a mistake and would weaken the USDA and the farm programs.

U.S. Rep. Steve Symms, a member of the House Agriculture Committee which also may have a key voice in studying the plan, said he would need strong evidence that a new Department of Natural Resources would result in more efficient management before he could support it. He pointed out the new Department of Energy in his eyes is a failure.

Arguments on the plan will begin immediately which should shed light on the supposed benefits. Fortunately, this issue is not so much a partisan hassle because it generally will pit Andrus forces against Secretary of Agriculture Robert Bergland and his backers.

Andrus contends he has followed a balance between the extreme environmentalists and extreme natural resource developers, and their criticisms against him would indicate he may be right.