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The western scene . . .

West governors face tremendous problems

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When the western governors gather in the scenic mountain setting at Teton Village later this week, they will find they will get their much-sought better recognition of state rights — but with it goes a high pricetag.

In nearly every Western Governors Conference, the state executives have complained bitterly and long they did not get the proper recognition from the White House. The criticisms were leveled particularly at administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

They then felt when Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976 they would get more power because, after all, he was one of their own as a former Georgia governor and active previously in the governors organization. On top of that, the Democrats had a lopsided advantage, holding the governorships in all but about a dozen states.

As it turned out, the governors fared no better under Carter than they did under previous administrations.

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President Reagan is also a former governor of California and he has shown clear indications for giving the states more recognition, but there's a catch — he is withdrawing considerable federal funding to the states.

This dissatisfaction surfaced at the National Governors Association at Atlantic City recently where many governors, including a number of Republicans who were avid Reagan supporters, were angered that much of the federal funding for state programs would be slashed 25 percent and more. The Democrats still hold a majority of the governorships but by a far narrower margin than four and six years ago.

In the 13 western states five years ago, for example, at the same Teton Village setting, only Alaska Gov. Jay Hammond and Washington Gov. Dan Evans were Republicans. This year, the situation is slightly better for the Republicans with an increase to five, leaving eight Democrats. This year, North Dakota is included in the western conference with Republican Gov. Allen Olsen.

Territorial governors of Pacific islands also attend, but they are appointed by the administration.

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Secretary of Interior James Watt is the main speaker and he may not find the reception among a majority of Democratic governors as cordial as some of the Republican oriented meetings he has attended. At the same time, it must be recognized that most governors, whether Democrats or Republicans, favor more natural resource development than Carter or his secretary of interior, former Idaho Gov. Cecil D. Andrus, advocated. Whether they would like as much as Watt and Reagan espouse is something else.

At the Midwestern Governors' Conference at Milwaukee last week, the administration's budget chief, David Stockman, predicted the American economy will come out of the doldrums and expand with an infusion of new capital, driving high interest rates down in the process. This, many governors doubt.

At that meeting, for example, Missouri Gov. Christopher Bond expressed concerns about an Internal Revenue Service ruling checking industrial revenue bonds. He complained the IRS decision shatters the states' ability and places greater burden on states to issue tax-exempt bonds for small farmers and small business.

The western state legislators at their conference at Reno last week also expressed disenchantment with the proposed Reagan slash of federal money to the states and adopted resolutions expressing opposition. At the same time, they went along with many Reagan programs calling for more natural resource development and less environmental safeguards. It would be no surprise for the western governors to take a similar stance.

At a recent Western Governors Policy Office conference at Denver, Wyoming Gov. Ed Herschler said federally assisted synfuels projects must be given financial aid to pay for environmental controls. He said western governors would not sacrifice the health and safety of the region in rash programs to accelerate domestic production.

Idaho Gov. John V. Evans likely carries one of the greatest burdens as he is expected to plead for help in view of the announced Bunker Hill mine closure in northern Idaho. It will throw some 2,100 men out of work and rippling adverse economic effects will strain the state's meager economic resources even further.