

The Post-Register

The political pulse

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The western scene . . .

Watt wins governors but they await action

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Secretary of Interior James Watt, constantly grinning and bantering, no doubt won the support of the Western governors when he appeared Friday at their annual conference at Jackson. But most reserved judgment until they see his words translated into action.

Watt was at his best in delivering his keynote talk and discussing the wide spectrum of rangeland issues. Some governors, particularly Montana's Ted Schwinden, Utah's Scott Matheson, Wyoming's Ed Herschler, and Alaska's Jay Hammond raised some questions on Watt's policies they disliked. They felt on such topics as oil and gas leasing on the Outer Continental Shelf, coal production, oil shale leasing and a myriad of other issues he may be leaning too far in favor of the vested interests.

Unfortunately, Idaho Gov. John V. Evans pulled out of the conference before Watt arrived, to attend a funeral at Lewiston and did not have the opportunity to express his views during the discussions.

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Watt, and his Bureau of Land Management director, Robert F. Burford, a former Grand Junction, Colo., rancher, constantly lampooned the previous Carter administration policies and vowed they would swing the pendulum from the left to center.

Although on the surface there were praises directed towards Watt, especially by the Republican governors, such as Nevada Gov. Robert F. List, conference chairman, North Dakota's Allen Olsen, and Oregon's Victor Atiyeh, many other governors, particularly the Democrats, expressed doubts until they see what actually happens. Of the 13 Western governors, eight are Democrats.

Watt did expound two views which are of paramount importance to the West — that he feels the Sagebrush Rebellion would transfer control of public lands from federal to state control is almost defused, although he agrees in spirit with the movement; and that he is strongly opposed to any interbasin transfer of water.

The interbasin water transfer opposition is especially applauded by the Pacific Northwest states; naturally less than happily received by those in the

Southwest, especially Nevada, California and Arizona.

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Watt felt he scored his greatest triumph by announcing his solicitor (attorney), William Coldiron, had reversed a previous opinion, and now gives the states priority in water rights management. This, of course, is warmly greeted by the governors who have long felt previous presidential administrations, both Democrats and Republicans, have largely ignored the governors on important issues.

Watt was at his best in delivering his keynote talk in which he announced the state water right opinion and his expected policies favoring more natural resource development.

However, he shined less than spectacular when he avoided answering hard questions on natural resource development and environmental safeguards from representatives of the news media at a press conference. He also can be criticized for shaking the hands of 50 drivers of a pickup truck caravan supporting his stand but cold shouldering the plea of the environmentalists to talk to them. After all, although Watts may disagree with them, they are loyal Americans and have a right to be heard.

It indicates that Watt is unusually sensitive. He appears to bear an intense dislike for any

who do not embrace his policies and will not even listen to their side but is indeed charming with those he believes subscribe to his philosophy. He even showed irritation when some of the governors questioned some phases of his philosophy, but covered this with a veneer of acquiescence.

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The western governors, however, failed to take forthright action on the many burning issues that came up for discussions, particularly on the wide field of rangelands, water projects, nuclear development, radioactive waste disposal, wilderness, multiple use designations, and others.

Instead, they adopted seven resolutions which centered on furthering prison corrections, international trade, oceanic research, and industrial bond tax exemption, hardly of such magnitude as to keep the decision makers up at night. This is a contrast with the hard stand governors have taken on critical issues in most previous conferences.

It is a surprise they took no positions on rangeland and natural resource policies which dominated the conference discussions. This would indicate their reluctance to reveal possible dissensions within their own ranks.



Top BLM directors

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JACKSON, WYO. — Two top Bureau of Land Reclamation officials Robert F. Burford, left, national director, and Robert Buffington, Boise, Idaho director, chat on BLM policies during the Western Governors Conference at Teton Village near Jackson last week.