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Obama to Name Salazar As Secretary of Interior Coloradan Is Described as Moderate

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When President-elect Barack Obama announces his appointment of Sen. Ken Salazar (D-Colo.) as interior secretary today, he will be placing a legislator better known for brokering deals between warring interests than for outlining an ambitious agenda of conservation.

Salazar, a fifth-generation Coloradan whose family settled in the West before the United States' founding and has ranched and farmed on the same land in the San Luis Valley for more than a century, has earned a reputation as a centrist during his four years in the Senate. He has pushed to temper energy exploration in the West even as he has backed offshore oil drilling and subsidies for ranchers on public land.

Several experts who have worked with Salazar over the years, including gas and mining officials, farm groups and national environmental leaders, said they expect him to support Obama's energy and environmental agenda rather than attempt to set his own policy course. While both Gale A. Norton and Dirk Kempthorne frequently clashed with liberal groups while heading the agency under President Bush, those experts predicted that Salazar is more likely to pursue compromises that might ease tensions over drilling, mining and endangered species protection on public and private land.



Most environmentalists and pro-business groups praised the selection of Sen. Ken Salazar.

"He's going to be an honest broker, and there are going to be competing interests in this job," said Bill Meadows, president of the Wilderness Society, an advocacy group. "He is trying to manage conflicts in a way that reaches resolution. I'm not sure he's articulated a grand vision for the public lands."

Like Meadows, most environmentalists interviewed praised Salazar's selection, as did leaders of pro-business groups, who described him as a willing listener who recognizes the need for domestic energy and agricultural production. But the pick has angered some green activists, who said a more aggressive liberal was needed to overhaul an agency that has been dogged by controversy during Bush's presidency.

"The most important task facing the next interior secretary is reforming the Department of Interior from the bottom up, and I'm not seeing anything to suggest that he's a visionary or a reformer," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity. "He's better than what's come before, but it looks like it's going to limp along as a semi-broken agency."

Salazar's name did not surface as a serious contender for interior secretary until last week, and many environmental activists had first backed New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who opted for the post of commerce secretary, and later Rep. Raul M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) for the job. Last week, more than 150 sent a letter to Obama backing Grijalva, who has challenged the Bush administration on several fronts

as chairman of the House Natural Resources subcommittee on national parks, forests and public lands.

Salazar fueled his career in Colorado by attracting bipartisan support and became the first Latino elected statewide when he won election as attorney general there a decade ago, and has worked to balance traditional energy development with a measure of environmental safeguards.

Marc W. Smith, executive director for the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States, noted that Salazar has backed offshore drilling for oil and gas and supported the use of natural gas as a backstop for renewable energy supplies because it burns cleaner than petroleum.

“More often than not, we agree on the goal, but as expected, we aren’t always going to agree on the approach,” Smith said in an interview. “He certainly understands that natural gas is a central element of a long-term national energy supply.”

National Mining Association spokeswoman Carol Raulston said her group has had an excellent relationship with Salazar going back to his time in state government. She noted that the Democrat has pushed for a “good Samaritan” bill that would make it easier to clean up abandoned mines by exempting any firm that did so from some of the legal liability and environmental requirements associated with such activities, and that he has backed federal funding for carbon sequestration that could help mining companies.

“He’s a very knowledgeable problem solver, very straightforward,” she said.

Since coming to the Senate in 2005, Salazar has sought to put the brakes on some of the Bush administration’s plans for energy development in his home state, arguing that Interior should lease the ecologically sensitive

Roan Plateau in stages rather than all at once, and that the agency needed to spend more time examining the environmental impact of Western commercial oil shale development. Although Salazar did succeed in putting oil shale development on hold for a year by inserting language into a spending bill that called for additional study, the administration has pushed ahead with new oil shale regulations and held a lease sale on Roan Plateau holdings in August.

Dwayne Meadows, a field representative for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, which focuses on the inner Mountain West, said Salazar’s moderate approach should produce concrete policy results in an Obama administration.

“He’s been supportive of public lands energy development, but he thinks it needs to be done responsibly and protect the other uses out there,” Meadows said. “He didn’t say, ‘Don’t drill the Roan Plateau,’ but, ‘Make sure you protect hunting and fishing recreational uses as well.’ “

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.