

Sen. Salazar Named Secretary of Interior

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By Avery Palmer, CQ Staff
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President-elect Obama has tapped Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., to be the next secretary of the Interior, where he will oversee a host of contentious issues that range from oil leasing to endangered species.

Salazar, who has served four years in the Senate, has a reputation as a moderate Democrat with a keen interest in public lands issues. Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter Jr., a Democrat, will name a replacement to fill the remaining two years of his term. Several current House members have already expressed interest in the spot.

"It's time for a new kind of leadership in Washington that's committed to using our lands in a responsible way to benefit all our families. That means ensuring that even as we are promoting development where it makes sense, we are also fulfilling our obligation to protect our national treasures," Obama said as he introduced Salazar at a Chicago news conference Wednesday.

"Over the last eight years, I think we've had an Interior Department that was deeply troubled," Obama said. "The Interior Department too often has been seen as an appendage of commercial interests as opposed to a place where the values and the interests of the American people are served."

The president-elect said that "few are better equipped to meet the energy and natural resource challenges we face in the 21st century."

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which will hold confirmation hearings on Salazar's nomination, called his colleague a "superb" choice. Salazar has served on the Energy committee since he became a senator.

"I'm delighted that President-elect Obama has chosen someone who has the record and the background and knows the substance as well as Ken," Bingaman said. "He understands how to manage federal lands and resources and knows the importance of working with stakeholders while protecting the public interest."

Deep Roots Salazar, 53, grew up on a remote mountain ranch in an area where his family has lived for five generations. He worked as a lawyer specializing in water and resources issues and was later director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. He served as the state attorney general from 1999 until he took his seat in the Senate in 2005.

As a senator, Salazar was a key player in many of the debates over the use of public lands and

resources. This experience could help prepare him to respond to President Bush's controversial legacy of opening vast new areas to energy production.

"I look forward to serving as a strong voice in his administration for the West and for the nation," Salazar said. "I look forward to working directly with President-elect Obama as an integral part of his team as we take the moon shot on energy independence."

Environmentalists will put considerable pressure on him to create new protections against oil and gas drilling. President Bush and Congress allowed a moratorium on production off the Pacific and Atlantic coasts to expire this year. It now falls to the Obama administration to decide when, where and how to allow new offshore energy leasing.

Salazar's views on energy production are nuanced. He was part of a bipartisan "Gang of 20" that proposed this year to allow drilling off the shores of four Southeastern states, but retain the moratorium elsewhere.

Just as controversial have been proposals for oil and gas drilling on federal land. Salazar opposed Bush administration plans to lease on Colorado's Roan Plateau, and to set up an oil shale leasing program in the northwestern part of the state.

The Interior Department also manages the national parks. Environmentalists say Salazar was a leader in calling for more park funding and better management. He introduced a bill (S 2817) to provide funding for park improvements to celebrate the National Park Service's upcoming centennial.

"He's been a go-to senator on national parks issues," said Bryan Faehner of the National Parks Conservation Association.

But environmentalists also want Obama to overturn a new rule, signed in the last months of the Bush administration, to allow loaded guns in the parks. Salazar voted for a bill in committee (S 3499) that would create a similar policy. The rule is supported by the National Rifle Association, while park ranger groups oppose it.

"We're hopeful, of course, that Sen. Salazar will be supportive of the Park Service on this issue," Faehner said.

Bush has finalized several other controversial, last-minute rules that Obama's administration may try to change or rescind. One rule would overhaul the implementation of the Endangered Species Act, while another would allow companies to move waste from mountaintop mining into rivers and streams.

The Interior Department has been torn by multiple ethics scandals during the Bush administration. Staff responsible for oil and gas leasing were found to have engaged in drug use and sexual misconduct with oil industry employees. Separately, investigations found political appointees interfering in scientific decisions over endangered species.

Some environmentalists expressed disappointment with Obama's choice of Salazar. They say they

would have preferred other contenders for the job who are considered more liberal, such as Reps. Raul M. Grijalva, D-Ariz., or Jay Inslee, D-Wash.

"He would have to clearly plant the flag that he is going to clean house and weed out corruption. And he just doesn't have that kind of reforming reputation, as did Grijalva and Inslee," said William Snape, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity.

But other conservationists said the choice bodes well. Salazar has "a broad and deep understanding of Western public lands issues," said David Abelson, a consultant with Western Resource Advocates.

The League of Conservation Voters, which rates candidates' environmental records, gave Salazar a 100 percent score in 2008 and a 73 percent score in 2007. The group criticized him for voting against an amendment to a water projects bill (HR 1495) that would require the Army Corps of Engineers to consider the long-term impacts of global warming.

"As a Westerner, Secretary Salazar has hands-on experience with land and water issues, and will restore the Department of the Interior's role as the steward of America's public resources," said Tony Massaro, the group's senior vice president.