



Obama picks a moderate

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It's not surprising that Kieran Suckling of the Center for Biological Diversity and Jon Marvel of the Western Watersheds Project are disappointed in Barack Obama's choice for Interior secretary, Colorado Democratic Sen. Ken Salazar.

The two activists have tapped the federal courts for the last two decades in their efforts to stop overgrazing, logging and other activities on public land. Suckling, of Tucson, Ariz., and Marvel, of Hailey, Idaho, have made frequent use of the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

They, and some other small environmental groups, were hoping that Obama would pick an Interior secretary willing to buck the political power of the states and Congress and leap over all other barriers to the achievement of their goals. Instead, they got in Salazar, a nominee whom Interior Department solicitor Bill Myers describes as "a cowboy hat-wearing, Western Democrat in the mold of (former Interior Secretary) Cecil Andrus." In other words, a moderate.

Salazar, a former Colorado attorney general, is also the former director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. He's a fifth-generation Hispanic Coloradan who grew up on a farm and owns a ranch. As a senator, he has fought against oil and gas drilling on Colorado's Roan Plateau, and he challenged the Bush administration's gung-ho efforts to spur oil shale development. He's a great example of "Next West" Democrats who have expanded the party's influence across the region.

He's also pro-gun, and he's not Raul Grijalva, the Tucson congressman that many environmentalists hoped would get the job. Marvel, who says one of his goals is pushing livestock grazing off the public lands altogether, put it clearly: "We're not very happy with Ken Salazar. After all, he's a rancher."

On the other hand, national environmental groups have all praised Obama's choice. Their power base is in Washington, D.C., and they have lots of alumni on Obama's transition team and in his inner circle.

They are confident Salazar will help them advance an environmental agenda that includes transforming the American economy to combat climate change. This is a mind-bogglingly ambitious agenda that can only be completed by legislative changes in

Congress, in the states and even in local governments. That's why Elise Jones, executive director of the Colorado Environmental Coalition, which represents 95 grassroots groups in the state, thinks Salazar is a good fit.

"It could be that a centralist like Ken Salazar can get more done because he's not a lightning rod, and he can work with all sides," Jones said. "He's not going to draw a backlash from traditional commodities industries."

Western Democrats have expanded their power by appealing to the new urban and exurban residents attracted to the region by its beauty, and by gaining some support from people in traditional industries like agriculture and mining. Obama's re-election could hang on how well he keeps this uneasy coalition together.

Fixing the economy, fighting two wars and addressing climate change are bound to be higher priorities than the traditional Western land battles over endangered species, motorized recreation, logging and mining. This could give Salazar a wide berth to make decisions in the next two years.

He will be tested soon by his decision whether to list as endangered the sage grouse, a bird that signals the health of millions of acres of sagebrush steppe habitat across 11 western states. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must decide by May whether to list the bird in a case filed on behalf of the Western Watersheds Project, Marvel's group.

If the sage grouse is listed, it could have the same kind of impact on public-land ranching that the spotted owl had on logging in the Pacific Northwest's old-growth forests in the late 1980s. It also could limit the development of wind, geothermal and solar energy across the Western deserts, as well as new utility line connections to spread-out alternative energy developments.

In 2004, scientists said that the sage grouse decision could have gone either way. Now, with West Nile Virus killing thousands of grouse, the Bush administration's determination to quickly bring on oil and gas, and fires destroying hundreds of thousands of acres of habitat, many environmentalists believe that the agency will have no choice but to list.

If that happens, Salazar will earn his keep if he can find common ground among a lot of ornery Westerners.

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