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Colo. senator reported as choice for Interior

By Tony Davis

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A Colorado senator appears to be on the verge of being chosen Interior secretary over U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva of Tucson.

Ken Salazar, who is finishing his fourth year as a U.S. senator, has emerged as the leading candidate for the job, according to national media reports.

Grijalva, one of a half-dozen other prominent candidates, was considered a leading contender in late November and early December, according to many sources. He has support from Hispanic groups and grass-roots environmental groups.

Grijalva isn't giving up, his press secretary said Monday evening.

"Until it is official, the congressman is still under consideration," said spokeswoman Natalie Luna. "We don't know what's true and what is a rumor."

If it occurs, Salazar's nomination would be a turnaround in Obama's Interior secretary search. A month ago, Salazar was quoted by a Colorado newspaper as saying he didn't expect to get a Cabinet seat.

Salazar, a member of the Senate Finance and Energy and Natural Resources committees, is a farmer and rancher. He was previously Colorado's attorney general and head of its Department of Natural Resources.

Like Grijalva the son of a migrant farm worker, Salazar was raised in a rural environment, "on a remote ranch without electricity or telephone," according to Salazar's Web site.

Salazar appears to have a more middle-of-the-road stance on the environment than does Grijalva, a liberal Democrat.

As chairman of the House Interior public lands subcommittee, Grijalva has waged a battle with the Bush administration over national parks and monuments and Bureau of Land Management lands, all managed by the Interior Department.

Salazar's lifetime score with the League of Conservation Voters in the Senate is 81. Grijalva's is 95.

Salazar has spoken out against the Bush administration's plans to accelerate oil-shale exploration in the Rocky Mountain states and drilling for oil on Colorado's Roan Plateau. He put into place a nationally recognized open-space protection program in Colorado, just as Grijalva pushed through the nationally known Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan while on the Pima County Board of Supervisors.

But Salazar supported and Grijalva opposed a new Interior Department rule allowing people to carry concealed guns in national parks. Salazar in the past supported offshore oil drilling measures before this year's run of high gasoline prices made that a popular issue.

Environmentalists are divided over his appointment. A private energy consultant and a ranching spokesman were supportive.

"He would be a strong candidate and is very concerned about the Bush rush to recklessly drill for oil and gas everywhere," said Rob Smith, the Sierra Club's Phoenix-based, Southwest representative. "His record as a senator shows he believes in protecting the land as well as energy development."

But Michael Finkelstein, a Tucson-based consultant for national environmental groups, said he doesn't think Salazar is as strong an environmentalist as Grijalva. Although he says he believes environmentalists can work with Salazar and give him their views, "it's such a shame that we're not getting basically the best conservationist in the country who understands the other side's views and considers all sides regarding issues," said Finkelstein, the former Center for Biological Diversity director, speaking of Grijalva.

But the center's biodiversity director, Noah Greenwald, said the group is cautiously optimistic, based on Salazar's statements on oil shale and other oil leasing in Colorado.

Given Salazar's background, "we feel that he understands the issues very well and that he would be a very viable candidate," said Patrick Bray of the Arizona Cattlemen's Association.

"He's lived off the land all his life. He understands the system that we have to deal with day in and day out and he would understand the most about how to streamline the system and better manage our public lands," said Bray, the group's deputy director for government affairs.

Many people like it that Salazar comes from an energy-producing state and understands energy issues, said Frank Maisano, a Washington, D.C.-based consultant for oil refiners and wind-energy producers.

"He walks a fine balance between the aggressive need for supplies and the need to protect resources," Maisano said.

But Jon Marvel, who runs a regional environmental group that has a Tucson representative said that Salazar "will completely undermine Obama's message of change. He will not bring change to the public lands of the western United States." He called the appointment "a travesty."

Marvel is executive director of the Western Watersheds Project, which wants to end public-lands ranching through a voluntary federal buyout — an idea Grijalva supports and many ranchers oppose.

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