

Obama nominates Sally Jewell for US interior secretary

Looking for balance between oil industry and conservation, president makes unconventional first pick for environment team

Suzanne Goldenberg,
US environment correspondent

Barack Obama chose the head of the REI outdoor equipment stores to manage America's wide open spaces on Wednesday, in the first pick of his second-term environment team.

The choice of Sally Jewell, an oil engineer who went on to win environmental awards, was unconventional. The post of interior secretary has generally gone to career politicians from western states. The outgoing secretary, Ken Salazar, was a Democratic senator from Colorado.

Jewell's name had not been in circulation before Wednesday's announcement, but she had apparently been on Obama's radar for some time. She worked with the White House on healthcare reform in 2009 and on the Great Outdoors Initiative in 2011. Jewell is also a longtime donor to Democratic candidates.

In a ceremony at the White House, Obama said Jewell's business background made her a good fit for the interior job. "She is an expert on energy and climate issues that are going to shape our future. She knows the link between conservation and good jobs. She knows there is no contradiction between being good stewards of the land and economic progress," he said.



Sally Jewell is a former oil engineer who has served as president of REI, the outdoor gear and clothing chain. Photograph: Lucy Nicholson/Reuters

By choosing Jewell, Obama appeared to be striving for balance between the oil industry, which has been pressing to expand drilling on public lands and off the coast of Alaska, and conservation and wilderness groups.

Jewell, with her background in oil as well as the outdoors, will be judged by how she navigates those two extremes, advocates on both sides said.

The Western Energy Alliance, which represents oil and gas producers, said it hoped Jewell's experience as an oil engineer and business leader would free up more land for oil drilling. "We hope to

see a better balance of productive development on non-park, non-wilderness public lands," the group said in a statement.

Bill Snape, a senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity, said he hoped Jewell would stand up to the oil industry.

"It is clear the secretary of interior nominee has a passion for national parks, but the question is whether she will be able to balance the natural values of our wild lands and wildlife with the ravenous pressure by industry to drill for fossil fuels," he said in an email.

Other environmental groups gave Jewell broader support, noting her work with environmental groups as well as her years as president of REI, the \$2bn a year outdoor gear and clothing chain.

“She is a practical, no-nonsense leader who would bring a sense of purpose to implementing the oil and gas reforms that have remained largely on the shelf. She is a strong pick,” Trout Unlimited said in an email.

In the Senate, which must confirm Jewell’s nomination, Democratic senator Ron Wyden called the choice “inspired”, saying her experience managing a large company was good preparation for managing. Lisa Murkowski, the Republican senator from Alaska, indicated in an email she would reserve judgment on Jewell’s qualifications until her hearing.

Now 56, Jewell, was born in the UK. Her family moved to the US when she was four, and she grew up camping and sailing in Puget Sound, Washington state. She studied mechanical engineering at the University of Washington, and married a fellow engineer a week after graduation. The couple have two grown children.

Jewell started her career with Mobil Oil, working for three years as an oil engineer in Oklahoma and Colorado. But she spent the next 19 years in banking. She joined REI as chief operating officer in 2000, and rose to chief executive five years later.

The company donates millions to conservation causes every year and has worked to introduce city children to the outdoors. Jewell has won a number of environmental awards, including the Audubon Society’s Rachel Carson Award.