



3. INTERIOR: BLM management team wins Senate confirmation (08/13/2009)

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Two of the Obama administration's highest-ranking public lands managers won Senate confirmation last week, overcoming opposition from Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who has clashed with the Obama administration over a hardrock mining bill.

Wilma Lewis will take her position as Interior assistant secretary for land and minerals management, while Bob Abbey was confirmed to become director of the Bureau of Land Management.

Together they will oversee much of the country's public lands and minerals. BLM, which has about 10,800 employees and an annual budget of about \$1 billion, manages 256 million surface acres -- more than any other federal agency. Lewis will be responsible for the management of those lands, as well as 1.7 billion acres of outer continental shelf, including much of the nation's offshore oil and gas fields.

Abbey, who retired as director of BLM's Nevada office in 2005, inherits an agency that met intense criticism from environmental groups during the Bush administration, which actively promoted expansion of oil and gas drilling on public lands.

As director, he will be charged with scaling back the last administration's oil and gas agenda while promoting an equally aggressive expansion of renewable energy projects sought by President Obama and Congress. Some of those projects, including large wind farms and solar arrays that cover thousands of acres, are already drawing close scrutiny from environmental groups that fear such projects could overrun public lands and damage sensitive ecosystems.

"They have some immediate challenges, including restoring a bit more balance to the agency," said Ann Morgan, the Wilderness Society's vice president for public lands and a former BLM state director in Colorado and Nevada.

Jim Baca, who served as BLM's director under the Clinton administration, noted that Abbey's success, in particular, will depend on backing from the president and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

"He really has to make sure if he wants to change things, if he wants to reform the way BLM does business, especially after the last eight years, he really needs to make sure he has the support of the secretary and the White House -- both," Baca said.

Senate battle

Winning support in the Senate proved difficult for both nominees, however.

McCain threatened to oppose their confirmations unless the Obama administration answered questions about its position on a proposed land-swap deal involving the Forest Service and Resolution Copper Mining, a subsidiary of Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton.

The deal, which McCain codified in [S. 409](#), would allow Resolution to acquire and mine roughly 4,200 acres of Arizona's Tonto National Forest in exchange for more than 5,500 acres of company-owned land in adjacent counties.

At Abbey and Lewis's confirmation hearings last month before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, McCain told the nominees that lawmakers "have a right to get a response from the administration on that issue," adding that until such answers are provided, "I will not approve of your nomination moving forward through the committee" ([Land Letter](#), July 16).

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack responded with a letter to Public Lands and Forests Subcommittee Chairman Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) explaining that the Forest Service had concerns about the measure, including the bill's failure to require that an environmental impact statement (EIS) be completed before the land swap proceeds. The Forest Service also wanted assurances that it would retain some regulatory authority over mining activities, including possible mitigation measures on the exchanged land ([E&E Daily](#), July 17).

McCain, while saying the matter remained unresolved, dropped his opposition, allowing Lewis and Abbey to clear the committee by a unanimous vote ([E&E Daily](#), July 30).

Frontline regulator

While Lewis will assume more of an oversight role within the Interior Department, Abbey will meet many of the Obama administration's public lands conflicts head-on, a role observers say he is prepared to handle.

Representatives of both advocacy groups and the mining industry noted Abbey's reputation for evenhandedness and a willingness to compromise to resolve land-management conflicts.

"He's got good environmental credentials, but he listens to everyone. When he makes his decision, you know it's based on his understanding of the public interest as a whole," said Glenn Miller, an environmental chemist at the University of Nevada, Reno, and a board member of Great Basin Resource Watch, a mining watchdog group.

Luke Popovich, a spokesman for the National Mining Association, said in an e-mail that Abbey "will be a real asset to the BLM, based on his solid accomplishments in Nevada, where his experience is likely to be invaluable."

Others characterized Abbey's record as mixed.

While crediting the new BLM director for protecting some valuable public lands in Nevada, Bob Fulkerson of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada said Abbey also turned over thousands of acres to developers and has backed the Southern Nevada Water Authority's controversial 300-mile-long groundwater pipeline project.

"Based on his record, I'd have to say the jury is out," Fulkerson said. "We certainly hope that he'll be a lot more aggressive in the pursuit of conservation and land stewardship, but we do know that he will listen to all sides."

Kathleen Sgamma, director of government affairs for the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States, described Abbey as someone "who understands the importance of multi-use on public lands," and expressed hope that Abbey will work to reduce the backlog of oil and gas leases currently under review because of environmental protests and lawsuits.

But Abbey is not expected to pursue policies universally liked by industry. Among other things, he has been outspoken in promoting changes to the 1872 General Mining Act, which allows private companies to extract minerals from public land without paying royalties ([Land Letter](#), June 18).

In a phone interview, Abbey said he intended to work with Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to identify "possible reforms to protect the environment, ensure a fair return for taxpayers and, at the same time, maintain a viable mining industry."

"It is time for reform," he added.

Abbey also has advocated tighter regulation of certain recreational activities on BLM lands, especially off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, which has damaged thousands of acres of sensitive lands.

"The bottom line is, if we continue to witness significant impacts to public lands caused by any type of special use, BLM will have to take action that would lead to limiting those impacts and avoiding those impacts," he said.

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