

Interior pick puts outdoor rec in spotlight

Kristin Millis/Managing Editor Nicholas Riccardi and Paul Foy/Associated Press | Posted: Wednesday, March 13, 2013 8:00 am

She doesn't wear a cowboy hat favored by traditional picks for interior secretary. Sally Jewell prefers fleece and Gore-Tex jackets and wears a safety helmet when she needs it for scaling cliffs, skiing or kayaking.

Jewell, the 56-year-old chief of Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI) represents a new face for a cabinet post more often associated with ranching or oil, gas and mining development. The fact that a mountain-climbing CEO of an outdoors company is President Barack Obama's nominee underscores a new reality in Washington and beyond: the growing influence of outdoor recreation as a political and economic force.

“Things are different. It’s a historic moment in public land management to have recreation as an important component,” said Ashley Korenblat of Western Spirit Cycling.

While past interior secretaries have ranged from conservationists, like former Arizona Gov. Bruce Babbitt, to allies of industry like Reagan's first Interior Secretary James G. Watt, they always have been challenged by the competing forces that want to use the federal government's vast lands.

“The conversation was only about resource extraction or conservation,” Korenblat said. “Jewell has the opportunity to optimize public lands with regard to all three areas: conservation, resource extraction and recreation.”

Critics complain that the outdoor industry has worked to lock up valuable lands and stymie development in the West. Though oil and gas trade groups aren't opposing Jewell, the nomination of a woman who has led a recreation-focused company with 128 stores in 31 states alarms some who argue that she might favor her own industry over others.

Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah said the recreation industry is "a special interest group like any other They have clearly wanted their industry to have a primary position on certain pieces of land."

Among the issues Jewell will need to navigate is the collision between a record-setting energy boom — which has led to sharply increased drilling over the past decade — and the desire of western communities to lure tourists and information-age workers who want to be able to play outdoors, using the gear the industry makes.

Bishop complained that REI has pushed for America's Redrock Wilderness Act, a bill that has languished in Congress for years without action because of the Utah delegation's opposition. It also helped fund

nonprofits who sued to stop the Bush administration's award of 77 oil and gas leases on Utah land in 2008.

Grand County Council chair Gene Ciarus echoed Bishop's sentiment.

He said he doesn't know much about Jewell, but he's concerned about her ties to environmental groups and how that might affect Grand County.

"I do know she is a big supporter of wilderness groups," Ciarus said. "I'm concerned about anyone who is that tied to special interest groups. The Red Rock Wilderness Act or the national monument would have a devastating effect on the county's economy."

However, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) believes Jewell is the right candidate because of her focus on conservation.

"Sally Jewell has a solid record supporting important conservation measures, and she understands the importance of the outdoor recreation economy and the critical role that protected public lands play in its success. SUWA looks forward to working with Ms. Jewell in the coming years to further protect Utah's red rock," said Mathew Gross, media director for SUWA.

At Thursday's hearing, Jewell cited federal statistics showing that the Interior Department generated more than \$12 billion in revenue from energy production last year, and that visitors to national parks generated an estimated \$30 billion in economic activity.

"These are impressive numbers. They underscore the important balance that the Department of the Interior must maintain to ensure that our public lands and waters are managed wisely, using the best science available, to harness their economic potential while preserving their multiple uses for future generations," Jewell said.

It was Jewell's work on the board of the National Parks Conservation Association and for President Barack Obama's "America's Great Outdoors Initiative" brought her leadership to the attention of the White House.

"She knows the link between conservation and good jobs," Obama said at a White House ceremony Feb. 6. "She knows that there's no contradiction."

John Weisheit, conservation director of Living Rivers, doesn't agree with Obama.

"He's considering appointing a person in the recreation industry," Weisheit said. "That tells me the corporations are going to get what they want. I don't see the difference between a tar sands mine and the recreation industry, because they're both consumptive and that's why we have an energy crisis and water crisis."

Weisheit's choice would be Congressman Raul Grijalva (D-Arizona), who was endorsed by two hundred conservation groups to be the Department of the Interior's secretary.

“This is the second time conservation groups have asked Obama to do the right thing,” Weisheit said.

Grijalva was also endorsed by conservation groups in 2008.

“He has sponsored a bill to clean up the pollution in the lower Colorado River and a bill to protect the Grand Canyon from uranium mining. Grijalva voted against the 2005 Energy Act – the national legislation that started tar sands mining, oil shale mining and exemption for fracking regarding the Water Safety Act,” Weisheit said. “And do you know who voted for it? Obama. His voting record as a senator indicates he is not going to respond to clean air, clean water and climate change.”