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If confirmed, Salazar promises ‘to clean up the mess’

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If confirmed next week to head the Interior Department, Sen. Ken Salazar (D-CO) will become steward of the public lands that make up 20 percent of the United States. After Thursday’s Senate Energy Committee confirmation hearing with senators one after another congratulating their Energy Committee colleague, there seems no doubt that Salazar will become Interior Secretary next week.

But the future won’t be an easy one for the Colorado rancher and lawyer whose ancestors helped found the city of Santa Fe 400 years ago in what is now New Mexico. For over two hours, senators peppered Salazar with questions about wide ranging issues that are bound to be contentious – including offshore drilling, oil shale development, clean coal technology, water rights, high-voltage transmission lines, the Endangered Species Act, carrying weapons in national parks, criminal charges against Interior Department employees for past abuses, improving conditions for Native Americans, and rewriting the still-in-effect 1872 mining law to add environmental protections for the first time.

Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee Chair Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) promised his “enthusiastic support” for the former Colorado Attorney General. He predicted that Salazar will be an excellent Interior Secretary based on his western roots, his Senate experience, his expertise in both water law and energy policy, and the fact that Salazar “understands the need to develop our oil and gas resources, but also the importance of balancing our energy needs with land conservation, outdoor recreation, and the environment. He has been a forceful advocate for clean, renewable energy technologies, for outdoor recreation, and for our rural communities.” The committee’s Ranking Member Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) was equally welcoming, calling Salazar “a consensus builder and a centrist.”

After his brother, Rep. John Salazar (D-CO), introduced him, Sen. Salazar explained that they grew up “on lands my family has farmed and ranched for five generations. . . Our parents taught us, and their parents taught them, that we have a responsibility to be good stewards of the water, soil, and wildlife around us, so that we can preserve the balance that allows us to ranch and farm, generation after generation.” He recalled that his

campaign slogan in first winning election as Colorado's Attorney General in 1998, then winning a U.S. Senate seat in 2004, was that he would "Fight for Colorado's land, water and people." He said that if confirmed as Interior Secretary, he will "continue to serve as a strong voice for our nation's land, water and people."

In a hearing room where senators listed major problems within the Interior Department and cited a highly critical 2006 report from Interior's Inspector General, Salazar pledged that "If confirmed, my first priority will be to lead the Interior Department with openness in decision-making, high ethical standards, and respect for scientific integrity. I will work to ensure that the Interior Department's decisions are based on sound science and the public interest, and not on the special interests. . . I want to clean up the mess that exists within the Department of Interior." He told senators concerned about past Interior Department decisions that he will review contested decisions "to make sure they are in compliance with the law and in compliance with science."

Salazar said his second priority, as part of President-elect Obama's determination to develop a comprehensive national energy plan, is to "set America free" by achieving energy independence. He explained that energy independence will be built on four cornerstones:

- Conservation.
- Pursuing renewable energy with "new vigor and new resolve."
- New technology.
- Responsible development of natural resources while protecting the environment and wildlife habitat.

Responding quickly and confidently to senators' questions, Salazar told Sen. Murkowski that he will support offshore drilling "where appropriate" but that there may be other areas "that are off limits." He said the issue of sharing revenues from offshore drilling will be "contentious" and will "require consultation." When Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC) asked about oil shale development, Salazar quipped that he wished the nation's major oil shale reserves were in the Carolinas, not in Colorado. He said the first step with oil shale should not be leasing land for "reckless" development but instead conducting research to establish energy and water needs for oil shale to "see what makes common sense." Listing coal as another "controversial subject," he supported continuing research on carbon capture and storage (CCS).

Salazar explained that in working on the Farm Bill last year, he realized that "there really are two Americas that have different realities." He said that of the 3,000 U.S. counties, the 1,700 classified as rural have lost population and "were being forgotten." He told senators he sees this trend being reversed by renewable energy and rural broadband which, he said, offer the prospect of "a renaissance for rural America."