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Kempthorne puts new face on Interior Department

By Alicia Mundy

Seattle Times Washington bureau



Kempthorne is a former Idaho governor, senator.

Dirk Kempthorne

Age: 55

Public life: Confirmed as secretary of the interior, May 2006; governor of Idaho, 1999-2006; U.S. senator, 1993-1999; mayor of Boise, 1985-1992.

Previous employment: State public-affairs manager, FMC Corp., 1983-1986; executive vice president, Idaho Home Builders Association, 1978-1981; assistant to the director, Idaho Department of Lands, 1976-1978

Personal: Raised in San Bernardino, Calif., graduated from the University of Idaho in 1975 with a degree in political science.

WASHINGTON — On a bright day in late June, Dirk Kempthorne took the steps of the Jefferson Memorial to trumpet the resurrection of America's symbol, the bald eagle.

His agency had worked for weeks to produce inspiring tales about the eagle's comeback, cute shots of eaglets and their protective parents, and stunning TV footage of the soaring bird.

It paid off. The announcement that the bald eagle was being removed from the endangered-species list was Washington, D.C.'s good-news story of the month.

The eagle's recovery likely wasn't the only accomplishment on Kempthorne's mind. After more than a year on the job, Kempthorne, the former Idaho governor and U.S. senator, may be the Bush administration's most popular Cabinet member on Capitol Hill.

Democrats and Republicans alike praise him for pumping more money into national parks, repairing the department's relationships with Congress, and moving beyond the scandals that damaged the agency in recent years.

Kempthorne even pleased skeptical environmentalists last December by proposing to list the polar bear as threatened because of thinning sea ice caused by global warming.

At the same time, he has continued Bush's controversial policies that favor oil and gas development on public lands, and his department has added no species to the endangered-species list since he became Interior secretary.

Kempthorne declined an interview request for this story.

"He's a great guy, and he's doing a good job," said Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Bremerton, an advocate of Northwest environmental causes who chairs the subcommittee that funds the Interior Department. "I think he is turning the place around."

Dicks added, though, that he is watching Kempthorne carefully on such matters as opening public lands to energy development.

The department's most obvious change has been in its top personnel.

Former Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who critics said demonstrated disdain for members of Congress, is gone. A deputy secretary involved in the Jack Abramoff lobbying debacle pleaded guilty to perjury and left. And the controversial director of the Fish and Wildlife Division, accused by the agency's inspector general of pushing politics over science, recently resigned.

Still, Rep. Jay Inslee, D-Bainbridge Island, isn't impressed.

"After his predecessor, how could he look bad?" said Inslee, who sits on the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

"He has the advantage of working in a department that's like The Bad News Bears: If you hit a dribbler single, you're an All-Star."

Showing deference

Kempthorne, 55, served one term in the Senate and was finishing his second term as Idaho governor when President Bush tapped him to replace Norton, who resigned.

He immediately promised money and attention for the national parks, stricter ethics policies and better cooperation with Congress.

"He had his relationship in the Senate on his side when he was named," said former Sen. Lincoln Chafee, R-Rhode Island, who is known for his work on environmental issues. "He was always one of those senators who could disagree with you but was not disagreeable."

Kempthorne knows politicians want deference, and Democrats in particular respond favorably to any Bush administration official who is remotely conciliatory.

At his confirmation hearing last year, members of the Senate Energy Committee tarred Norton in absentia and welcomed Kempthorne as a savior.

"It's so good to see my good friend and colleague," said Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii. "I know your wisdom will help our country."

Kempthorne reminded the panel that he had visited each member's office the previous week, to help "ground me in the enormous responsibility that comes with this assignment."

He was confirmed unanimously by the committee and by a voice vote in the Senate in May 2006.

One month later, he went humbly, and on his own initiative, to see Dicks, who was ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee on Interior. Dicks was in the minority at the time; Kempthorne could have skipped the visit.

But Kempthorne asked Dicks what he wanted from Interior. Dicks talked about the reduction of the Park Service's budget and the problems it was causing, particularly in Washington state. Kempthorne committed himself to fixing that.

In September, on the 90th anniversary of the National Park Service, Kempthorne announced the Centennial Project to improve and restore national parks. He vowed that the agency would raise \$3 billion in public and private money by 2016 for the effort.

"That was very astute on his part," said Dave Alberswerth of the Wilderness Society. "What's the most popular public service? It's not the IRS," he said, laughing. "It's the Park Service."

Kempthorne didn't stop with parks in his efforts to burnish Interior's image. The department sometimes issues three or four press releases a day on its accomplishments and goals.

Interior promised \$4 million to help save elephants and tigers as part of an international push to stop the trade in endangered species. Kempthorne lauded veterans of the Battle of Midway in the Pacific in World War II at a special ceremony. He praised conservation efforts in Guam and American Samoa, whose federal policies his department coordinates.

Recently, the agency hosted a publicity-garnering exhibit on the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington; Interior oversees The Capitol Mall. And, of course, there's the bald eagle soaring off the endangered-species list.

Critics unconvinced

Despite these efforts, environmentalists and some members of Congress say Kempthorne has done little to change his department's most controversial policies.

"On the ground here in the Pacific Northwest, we haven't seen a difference under Secretary Kempthorne," said Kristen Boyles, an attorney for the environmental group Earth Justice.

"In the last year, we've seen proposals from his agency to slash protections for old-growth forests that are home to marbled murrelets and spotted owls, and we continue to see politics trumping scientific decisions."

Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington also has her concerns.

"While Interior Secretary Kempthorne has proven himself more reasonable than his controversial predecessor, the fact remains that the constant assaults on America's pristine public lands are conceived from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue," Cantwell said in an interview.

"Important environmental issues like protecting the Endangered Species Act and pristine areas from irresponsible mining continue to be fights between Congress and this administration."

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), an agency within Interior, is issuing as many oil- and gas-drilling permits for federal land as it did a year ago, if not more, Alberswerth of the Wilderness Society said.

Dicks tried to get BLM to back down on leasing during one hearing in March and finally cut some \$29 million of its budget in an appropriations bill to make the point.

BLM issued a permit this spring for mining at the northeastern edge of Mount St. Helens. Cantwell opposes the project, saying it could affect the Green and Cowlitz rivers.

And Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., had blocked the confirmation of Kempthorne's pick to lead the BLM to draw attention to his concerns about BLM's energy-exploration plans for the Roan Plateau in Colorado.

Kempthorne agreed to give the state of Colorado more time to review the exploration plans, and the BLM nominee, James Caswell, was confirmed by the Senate last week.

The Interior Department also supports opening Bristol Bay in Alaska for energy exploration. Inslee and Republican Rep. Dave Reichert of Auburn have both warned that an oil spill there would be disastrous for the Seattle-based fishing fleet.

Dicks gives Kempthorne credit for addressing complaints of political interference with scientific analyses in the Fish and Wildlife Division.

Last month, Interior announced it would review eight wildlife-preservation decisions decried by environmental groups, saying they might have been improperly handled by the head of the Fish and Wildlife Division, Julie MacDonald, who recently resigned.

However, the agency will not review MacDonald's decision to loosen protections for the splittail fish, a species in the Sacramento Valley.

MacDonald owns an 80-acre farm that includes splittail habitat.

Alicia Mundy: 202-662-7457 or amundy@seattletimes.com