

Salazar, Bennett reach oil-and-gas deal

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Washington » The Senate rapidly confirmed Interior Deputy Secretary David Hayes on Wednesday night just hours after the Obama administration and Utah Sen. Bob Bennett announced a deal to remove a block on his nomination.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar vowed a thorough review of oil and gas leases in Utah he earlier shelved, prompting the quick confirmation vote and an equally speedy declaration of victory from Bennett, who had held up Hayes' nomination.

"The Senate has sent a clear message that we will hold the administration to its commitment of pursuing a balanced energy approach, which must include developing our energy resources here at home," Bennett said, in announcing the agreement.

The Senate last week voted against moving forward on Hayes' nomination, backing Bennett's point when Democrats fell three votes short of rolling over GOP objections.

"The victory on the Senate floor last week elevated this to a high enough level that the secretary began a personal review of the issue and has admitted that the department relied on inaccurate information," Bennett said.

Salazar in a letter confirmed he already has begun a "personal review" of the 77 parcels and "determined the need for a formal review."

That examination, he promised, would look at all aspects of the consultation between the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service and the proximity of the parcels to national parks and monuments.

Salazar acknowledged there had been consultation between the BLM and Park Service that resulted in the removal of some parcels close to protected parks and monuments for its Dec. 19 auction.

That consultation occurred between the BLM's initial posting of the lease parcel list on Nov. 4 and the agency's final list released Dec. 12.

Salazar reiterated his commitment for a prompt review of the parcels, including an on-site visit by within 10 days of Hayes' confirmation.

Steve Bloch, executive director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, which sued over the lease sale, said the agreement changes little but allows Bennett to declare victory.

"Sen. Bennett is [making] a silk purse out of sow's ear; he's making lemonade out of lemons," Bloch said. "The senator saw the writing on the wall, and rather than lose face with the vote, he's declared victory."

Bennett, a three-term senator, is facing what could be his toughest re-election next year amid grumbling by conservatives. Attorney General Mark Shurtleff announced his candidacy Wednesday against Bennett.

Senate Democrats had planned to force a second vote this week on proceeding to Hayes confirmation and said they believed they'd have enough members to get to a final vote.

Salazar said he was pleased Bennett and fellow Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska dropped their roadblock against Hayes.

"I have committed to Sen. Bennett that David Hayes, once confirmed, will promptly review the 77 disputed Utah oil and gas parcels, one by one, as I have promised, and we will determine which, if any, are appropriate for development," Salazar said. "I have also pledged that though we will agree on some issues and disagree on others, my door will always be open to Senator Bennett and Senator Murkowski."

The Alaska senator praised Salazar for listening to their concerns and agreeing on some points.

"While it's unfortunate that it required a showdown on the Senate floor, it's important that the administration respond in full and in a timely [manner] to senators' questions," Murkowski said.

It is unclear what practical effect Salazar's review might have.

A federal judge on Jan. 17 halted the lease auction of the thousands of acres auctioned to oil and gas companies for development, saying that the BLM hadn't followed federal clean-air and historic-preservation laws. That court ruling occurred prior to Salazar's action.