

Watt applauds Bush energy strategy

By

Denver Post Washington Bureau

Wednesday, May 16, 2001 - WASHINGTON - The Bush administration's emphasis on drilling its way out of the country's energy problems is enough to make James Watt nostalgic.

Watt, who pushed for more energy development on public lands as President Reagan's interior secretary, says Vice President Dick Cheney's recent speech placing production ahead of conservation is just what he was recommending in the early 1980s.

"Everything Cheney's saying, everything the president's saying - they're saying exactly what we were saying 20 years ago, precisely," Watt said in an interview with The Denver Post from his winter home in Wickenburg, Ariz. "Twenty years later, it sounds like they've just dusted off the old work."

"Any reasonable, halfway intelligent person is going to come to the same conclusion: you've got to have more oil, you've got to have more coal, you've got to have more of everything," Watt said. "You've got to have more conservation too, but conservation and solar energy and wind energy - they're just teeny infant portions. You're not going to run the world with solar energy by the year 2001, or 2002 or 2010."

President Bush will announce his energy policy Thursday. The policy has been drafted behind closed doors by a task force headed by Cheney which includes current Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who worked for Watt in Denver in the 1970s.

Cheney outlined some of his thinking in a recent speech in Toronto in which he dismissed the idea that "we could simply conserve or ration our way out" of what he called an energy crisis. Environmentalists and Democrats charged the administration is shortchanging conservation to benefit the oil companies and energy interests who helped bankroll Bush's campaign.

Responding to the criticism, the administration is expected to highlight the conservation elements of the plan Thursday. But published reports indicate the plan is expected to push for more coal mines, oil refineries and pipelines.

Watt and national environmental groups rarely agree on anything, but they do agree on the similarity between Bush's energy plans and Watt's goals in the '80s.

"It's deja vu all over again. It's what we saw with the energy 'crisis' when James Watt was in charge," said Johanna Wald, director of the lands program for the National Resources Defense Council. "They did say it was going to be different, but so far there are a lot of similarities."

As interior secretary for Reagan, Watt supported oil and drilling in wilderness areas and refuges, increased offshore drilling and opposed expansion of national parks.

His energy proposals enraged environmentalists, and his brusque style offended many others. He remade the department in a manner more friendly to resource development, but often lost head-on clashes with Congress over policy. He resigned after an off-the-cuff remark about placing a "a black ... a woman, two Jews and a cripple" on an advisory panel sparked outrage.

Environmentalists, whom Watt still despises, credit him with reawakening the environmental movement.

Watt came to the Reagan cabinet from Denver, where he had led the conservative Mountain States Legal Foundation, the industry-supported group that fought the legal battles of the "wise use" movement.

Watt says environmentalists have cost the nation 20 years in terms of solving energy problems, which he also lays at the feet of the Clinton administration's "laxities."

He figures Bush and Cheney's success in pushing through their energy policy will depend on this summer. If gasoline prices soar still higher and Americans are left with living rooms darkened by blackouts, they'll prevail, he said.

"The American people will go for any kind of energy program that solves their problem," he said. "They don't want it done 10 years from now, do they? They want it solved today."