

AAG Washington Monitor

Kempthorne Appointed to Take Over at Interior

On March 16, President Bush nominated Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne to serve as U.S. Secretary of the Interior. If confirmed, Kempthorne would replace Gale Norton, who announced her resignation on March 10. The Secretary of the Interior oversees the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the Federal Geographic Data Committee, and several other federal agencies and accounts critical to geography.

Kempthorne has served as Idaho's chief executive since 1999 and has spent time as as Chairman of the National Governors Association, Chairman of the Western Governors Association, and President of the Council of State Governments. Prior to his service as Governor, Kempthorne was a member of the United States Senate. Earlier in his career, Kempthorne served as Mayor of Boise for seven years.

Kempthorne, who must be confirmed by the Senate, is likely to receive enough votes from his former colleagues, but he could face some tough questions on several Bush Administration environmental policies. Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) has indicated his intention to put a hold on the nomination to ensure a "vigorous debate" on topics which could include endangered species protection, drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), and other proposals to expand domestic energy development. Meanwhile, we at the AAG have been working with our colleagues in the USGS Coalition to encourage Senators

to ask Kempthorne to discuss the importance of USGS research accounts and other activities.

House Passes Higher Education Act Renewal

On March 30, the House of Representatives passed revamped legislation to renew the Higher Education Act (HEA) for five years by a mostly party-line vote of 221-199. When the bill (H.R. 609) was first brought up for consideration the day before, it was largely unchanged from when it was passed by the House Education and the Workforce panel last summer. The most significant changes to the bill included:

- Dropping a plan that would have radically reshaped the formula for distributing funds through the three "campus based" student aid programs, such as the Perkins Loan, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and Work Study Programs. The programs would have been reshaped in ways that would have shifted funds away from many private colleges that have been in the programs for decades and toward younger institutions, like community colleges and for-profit institutions.
- Eliminating or easing several of the requirements for colleges that raise their tuitions significantly and repeatedly.
- Clarifying a provision that allows state agencies to accredit colleges by saying specifically that the agencies cannot require institutions in the state to be accredited by them.

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education and former president

of the AAG responded to the changes by noting that "In the past we had significant reservations about several parts of the bill that the House approved today. While some concerns remain, Chairman Howard P. (Buck) McKeon has made a significant number of positive modifications that will help minimize the regulatory impact on colleges and universities. We are grateful that Mr. McKeon was responsive." Many Democrats nonetheless voted against the bill because they felt it wouldn't do enough to make college affordable for low- and middle-income students.

Clarification

In the March issue of this column, I reported that the United States Geological Survey's Geographic Analysis and Monitoring (GAM) Program "would receive a slight boost of \$155,000" in its Fiscal Year 2007 budget. While this is accurate, due to other budgetary actions, the overall budget for geographic research at the USGS is being reduced by two million dollars. Budgeted funds for the program are being cut by this amount, while funds that have historically supported geographic research from other programs are being transferred to the GAM Program, which has the result of masking the reduction. Thanks to Jonathan Smith and colleagues at USGS for pointing this out. ■

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