

Energy Insider by William Engdahl

Watt retreating into the wilderness?

The new Interior proposal on mining and exploration underscores a problem: no resource strategy.

Interior Secretary James Watt performed what press has termed a "dramatic turnaround" Feb. 21, announcing that he will submit legislation to Congress calling for a moratorium through the end of this century on all mineral, mining, and oil and gas exploration on "wilderness" federal lands. Initially, the controversial cabinet secretary was committed to reversing this egregious Carter policy, which locked up tens of millions of acres of some of the nation's most valuable federally owned lands in Alaska and Western states including Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming. Now, he has agreed to prevent development of such lands for the next 18 years, and thus the apparent "turnaround."

The neo-feudalists who call themselves environmentalists, however, have had varied reactions. While the National Resources Defense Council, which boasts of two "moles" in the Bureau of Land Management, says those "moles" assured them that Watt has "made a significant backdown" from his resource-development commitment, a representative from the equally primitivist Wilderness Society told me that, on the contrary, Watt's decision was a "Trojan Horse"—appearing to concede, the Interior Secretary has actually sabotaged two decades of efforts to lock away valuable resources *permanently*. A young man from the Sierra Club poetically dubbed

Watt's plan "a crock of s--t."

Actually, it is a stupid concession to the folks who have named their club after a desert. Under provisions of the 1964 Wilderness Act, a 20-year period of "review and study" was to have allowed seismic testing and exploration of proposed "wilderness" lands. Then, after Dec. 31, 1983, Congress was to use the results to designate as permanent wilderness only those lands deemed not to have overriding mineral value. Watt has now proposed that through 1999, all such potential wilderness lands be kept off limits—unless the President deems it a national emergency. Congress could then re-evaluate after 1999. He also proposes that 36 million acres in "non-wilderness" lands locked away by Cecil Andrus, his predecessor, be immediately released for mineral development.

This is typical of the way Watt and his associates, who came to Washington committed to reversing years of environmentalist sabotage, are fundamentally backing off on the most urgent national priorities. It is not just the Sierra Club's howling every time someone proposes that a human being is more important than a grizzly bear. The way Paul Volcker's interest rates have created a federal deficit, and David Stockman's coordinated budget cuts have *set policy* for every administration department, people like Watt are simply manipulated into jockeying for small change.

To wit: Last summer, the Secretary announced plans to proceed with approval of permits for seismic testing on Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness area. The area borders on Yellowstone National Park. It was like waving a red flag before a bull. The environmentalists screamed and the House Interior Committee voted to invoke an obligatory freeze on the action.

The whole petty affair served to undercut support for the important moves to open offshore and on-shore areas for energy exploration.

Recently, Watt also gave a green light to a project representing unqualified disaster from the standpoint of the national economy and the environment. This is the ETSI coal slurry pipeline project, which has been designed by Atlantic-Richfield and Lehman Brothers Kuhn Loeb to steal water from the American West in such magnitudes that it could undercut irrigated agriculture (see *EIR*, Feb. 16, 1982). It is part of the strategy to devastate the water and mineral resources of the West devised by one of the leading environmentalists in the world: Robert O. Anderson.

At the same time, insistently over recent months, Watt has publicly opposed the kind of long-range national water policy typified by the plan for a North American Water and Power Alliance, which he has called "environmentally" destructive, but without which the West, including American food-producing capacities, absolutely will not survive.

What has become clear is that James Watt has no real thought-out policy, no nation-building strategy, and has become easy prey to the combined screams of the Sierra Club and Stockman and his friends.