

Four Top Natural Resource and Recreation Figures Share Views on Obama Administration and Recreation Program Prospects



A panel of seasoned natural resource and conservation leaders with experience in and out of top government posts told recreation community leaders during a special November Recreation Exchange what they expect to see as the new Obama Administration takes shape. The session was held in the venerable Occidental Restaurant, just a block from the White House as President George W. Bush and President-elect Barack Obama met

in the Oval Office to discuss Transition efforts. The panel addressed both opportunities and challenges but reached a consensus that recreation and conservation issues could do well if the recreation community organizes promptly and relates recreation to Obama Administration priorities, including economic recovery and healthcare improvements.

The guests included: Tom Kiernan, President of the National Parks Conservation Association; Jim Lyons, Lecturer and Research Scholar at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and Vice President with Oxfam America; Tom Fry, President of the National Ocean Industries Association; and Doug Wheeler, a partner with Hogan & Hartson in Washington. American Recreation Coalition Chairman Thom Dammrich moderated the session.

Tom Kiernan, who has also served as a senior-level official in the Environmental Protection Agency and at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, told the group that the next four years offered “unparalleled challenges and opportunities.” He also shared President-elect Obama’s responses to an NPCA questionnaire where candidate Obama spoke of “fond memories as a kid of Yellowstone National Park” during a visit with his mother, and labeled the parks as “precious treasures which need to be available to every American to enjoy.” In his response, the President-elect also pledged to address the National Park Service’s “funding shortfall so that by 2016, the agency has the resources needed” to enter its second century. Mr. Kiernan noted several important opportunities, including: the second economic stimulus package, which may provide partial Centennial Challenge funding; a new energy bill, which will direct anticipated increases in Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) bonuses and royalties; the new surface transportation bill expected in late 2009; and an anticipated new national service program. Yet he also warned that the core budget for park operations was likely to be under great pressure and that the strong support for the National Park Service Centennial displayed by the Bush Administration may not be carried over into the Obama Administration.

Jim Lyons, who served as a senior Hill staffer and as Under Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and the Environment in the Clinton Administration, offered insights from his active role in the 1992 Transition process, as well as his contacts with key Obama aides. He told the group that while the 1992 Transition was chaotic, the current effort was methodical and organized. He explained that Transition Co-Chair John Podesta had begun meetings with Bush Administration executives in August and that the process was now in place in Washington. While acknowledging budgetary pressures, Mr. Lyons emphasized that the current economic situation offered a tremendous opportunity for real, designed changes, including growth in “green jobs.” Recreation leaders need to help redefine “infrastructure investments,” he said, well beyond roads and bridges to include natural resource investments. Mr. Lyons told the group that there was real progress possible for recreation if recreation efforts were linked to Obama priorities in energy and health. Recreation can and should be positioned as a keystone for healthy people and healthy communities, he told the group.

Tom Fry, who served in the Department of the Interior as both the Director of the Bureau of Land Management and the Director of the Minerals Management Service, told the group that “multiple use” has taken on an entirely new meaning over the past two decades, with recreation and wildlife becoming far more important to the public and federal agencies. He reminded the group that public lands have taken on new importance because of western community growth, noting that two thirds of those in the west live within 50 miles of BLM lands. Mr. Fry expressed concerns about overall public lands budgets, expressing his expectation that there might be some shifting of dollars but that new funds and programs would be rare. He urged support for key programs like the National Landscape Conservation System – an initiative he feels will create a stronger public support base for BLM lands. Mr. Fry urged recreation leaders to work with county commissioners and other interests, noting the positive political impact of non-traditional allies. He also warned the group that funding competition can come from other “good” programs, like the Wild Horse and Burro Program. Mr. Fry supports efforts to link recreation needs to large infrastructure programs – whether under the economic stimulus package or the new surface transportation legislation.

Doug Wheeler served for eight years as California’s Secretary for Resources, seven years at the U.S. Department of the Interior as Assistant Legislative Counsel and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, and at a number of nonprofit environmental and conservation organizations, including his role as Executive Director of the Sierra Club. He shared several key messages with the group. First, Mr. Wheeler applauded and urged support for important state-level initiatives, noting that state park and conservation efforts dwarf federal efforts. He expressed enthusiasm for the Outdoor Resources Review Group (ORRG), organized at the invitation of and in cooperation with Senators Lamar Alexander and Jeff Bingaman. ORRG is both exploring recreation supply and demand and assessing whether a new national commission – the third focusing on recreation – might provide the nation with important progress in connecting Americans to the outdoors and producing significant benefits to the nation. Mr. Wheeler agreed that funding constraints would be considerable, but emphasized opportunities under the recently enacted Farm Bill and the surface

transportation legislation – as well as developing opportunities under energy bills (OCS receipts) and global climate change legislation (cap and trade and environmental services programs). He also urged recreation leaders to be mindful of the need to continue conservation easement tax policies.

Thom Dammrich posed a variety of questions to the panel and sparked lively exchanges among the guests. Addressing a question on why the connection between healthy lifestyles and outdoor recreation receives much lip service but not funding, Mr. Lyons told the group the real challenge is to build an understanding in Congress that this issue must be as important to the Department of Health and Human Services as it is to the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture. He is optimistic that the recreation community has a real ally regarding this issue in future First Lady Michelle Obama, who would champion the need to get children outdoors because of her two young daughters. Mr. Wheeler agreed that the



government needs to overcome its “stovepipe mentality” and that getting Americans to lead healthier outdoor lives is every agency’s responsibility. He noted the recreation and health research project underway in several park units to measure the potential for building public awareness about the health and physical activity link, for encouraging more physical activity during park visits and for creating longer term lifestyle changes through park visits. The preliminary results, he said, were very encouraging.

The panelists offered differing views on the issue of the Government Accountability Office’s study on possibly moving the Forest Service from the Department of Agriculture to Interior. Mr. Lyons said as long as the working relationships between the agencies are healthy, where the agencies are located is not critical and substantial costs of aligning rules and policies could be avoided. Mr. Wheeler said the move would make relationships between the federal land management agencies more effective and reminded the group of a proposal dating back to the Nixon Administration.

Questions about the recreation community’s strength as a grassroots organization and the need to link recreation interests to America’s developing infrastructure received several positive responses from the panel. Mr. Fry said outdoor recreation’s power as a grassroots movement lies in the ability to convert enthusiasm for activities into a field force on policy issues, and urged recreation interests to work in coordination with other interests – and especially less apparent allies. He particularly urged an outreach to county supervisors and other local politicians.

Mr. Lyons said recreation’s tie to the new Administration’s plan for infrastructure improvements is premised on job creation. He suggested that the recreation community

look for allies in Congress like Peter DeFazio (D-OR), who represents one of the most densely forested districts in the country, and whose constituencies would benefit from the creation of “green jobs” and recreation infrastructure improvements. He also expressed enthusiasm for House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Jim Oberstar’s focus on “livability” as a theme for the next surface transportation bill.

One question that asked whether there was much support for invigorating the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) with new oil and gas revenues generated much discussion from the panel. Mr. Wheeler strongly warned the recreation community against over-reliance on LWCF dollars and added that he does not see it as “a promising source of much greater revenue for our purposes” in the future. He countered with a recommendation for focusing on environmental services programs. Mr. Lyons suggested that the recreation and conservation communities stand to benefit more from climate change legislation and funding linked to carbon offset credits. Another hot topic was whether oil drilling on public lands was compatible with the primary use of those lands. Mr. Fry stated that the question of whether to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) had transcended the real, on-the-ground issues. He expressed disappointment that the Bush Administration used ANWR as its energy policy, saying that kept us from having productive discussions about overall exploration and recovery efforts. Mr. Lyons observed that solar and wind power are also in demand, but much contention exists in siting those energy facilities, too. He said we must look at a more comprehensive approach and increase the transparency in the process of energy planning.

In final comments, the group underscored the importance of measuring the results of public programs, and of agreeing to the metrics for judging success. And then the group went silent when asked to offer predictions for key appointees in the next Administration.

Recreation Exchanges are hosted in Washington, D.C. by the American Recreation Coalition, featuring guests who are influencing recreation public policy in America. Information on past and future programs is available at: www.funoutdoors.com.

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