

# Obama's Choice of Salazar Disappoints Progressives

by Randy Shaw, 2008-12-16

The [New York Times](#) and [Los Angeles Times](#) are among those praising Barack Obama's new "Green Team." Carol Browner, a longtime ally of Al Gore, will head climate change efforts, veteran EPA official Lisa Jackson will head that key agency, Nancy Sutley (an aide to Antonio Villaraigosa) will run the White House Council on Environmental Quality, and Steven Chu, whose choice has drawn raves, will be Energy Secretary. But plaudits for Obama's environmental commitment preceded his appointment of Colorado Senator Ken Salazar as Secretary of Interior. Interior handles all of what used to be called "the environment" prior to rising climate change – including forest and salmon protection, mining restrictions, endangered species and the preservation and enhancement of our national parks. Obama's selection of Salazar has left some progressives fit to be tied, though environmental groups happy about his other picks are not likely to publicly complain. Salazar has a generally good environmental record, but he is not known as a close ally of environmental groups. Environmentalists expected more, someone like progressive Arizona Congressman [Raul Grijalva](#), whose inside track to the job apparently fell prey to opposition from Obama's Southwest business supporters.

Barack Obama was strongly praised for picking a stellar "Green Team" when a key member of that team – the Secretary of Interior – remained to be selected. Considering how problematic the two leading contenders for the position were, and that he picked Senator Salazar, questions are raised as to whether the President is as passionate about protecting the natural environment as he is about stopping global warming.

Consider the two leading contenders before Salazar suddenly emerged:

## Mike Thompson

For some reason, California's influential Democratic congressional delegation was pushing North Coast Congressman Mike Thompson for the Interior post. Thompson backed Bush's phony "Healthy Forests" initiative and opposed efforts to prevent new roads in Alaska's pristine Tongass Forest – this "Blue Dog" Democrat was a poor choice for Interior.

## David J. Hayes

You can get the full story on Hayes, who heads Obama's environmental transition team, [right here](#). The short story is that he has served as an attorney for the Chemical Manufacturers Association, a lobbyist for the Los Angeles Metropolitan Water District, and represented Ford in a case where the company was charged with dumping lead-based paint sludge near homes and streams in New Jersey.

## Ken Salazar

I met Salazar at the recent Democratic National Convention. I had a nice conversation with him about Cesar Chavez, and he expressed great enthusiasm for my book, *Beyond the Fields*.

Salazar was never even mentioned as a leading candidate for the Interior job until December 15, the same day he was offered and accepted the post. The first clue came from the Denver Post, which [reported that day](#) that Salazar was "poised to head Interior."

Here's the good news about Salazar, from information found on [Daily Kos](#) and other sources: he has opposed oil shale development in Colorado, and sponsored legislation to repeal fees and increase access of public lands to low-income families seeking to visit national parks.

He's been strong on mercury regulations. He supports the right of eminent domain to appropriate land for national parks and open spaces. Salazar was instrumental in the formation of the Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve. The formation of the park prevented a water developer from sucking the valley dry - and the Dunes and the Rio Grande with it.

Salazar's participation in creating the Great Outdoors Colorado fund resulted in an increase in state park lands of more than 400%, as well as an improvement to the quality of those parks.

Now for the bad news: In 2005, Salazar voted against increasing fuel-efficiency standards (CAFE) for cars and trucks, and against an amendment to repeal tax breaks for ExxonMobil and other major oil companies.

In 2006, Salazar voted to end protections that limit off-shore drilling in Florida's Gulf Coast.

In 2007, Salazar was one of only a handful of Democrats to vote against a bill that would require the US Army Corps of Engineers to consider global warming when planning water projects.

But Salazar's most recent League of Conservation Voters rating was 100%, and it was 85% in 2007. There is no way that leading environmental groups will oppose his nomination.

### **Battling Climate Change vs. Environmental Protection**

The Obama Administration had difficulty finding an Interior chief, and ultimately picked a more moderate choice, because unlike the climate change and alternative energy issues, environmental protection divides Democrats.

Nearly all Democrats support investing in wind, solar and other alternative energy, and back higher fuel economy standards, "green" buildings, and other strategies to make the country more energy efficient.

But Democrats have different views on oil and gas exploration and mining on public lands, on forest protection, endangered species, and on other environmental protections that some businesses claim hurt jobs.

That's why the Secretary of Interior position has long proved so critical: it issues the rules and regulations impacting the above concerns.

Prior to global warming, the Secretary of Interior was perceived as the President's top environmental advisor. The position remains one of the most important in the Cabinet, which is why environmentalists should not cheer Obama's "Green Team" until they see his new Interior Secretary in action.

*Randy Shaw is the Editor of Beyond Chron and the author of the newly-released [Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century](#) (University of California Press)*