

which I am now once again a member. Throughout her career, Ms. Chao has accepted the challenges that have confronted her and pursued her responsibilities with firmness, fairness, and always with a quiet dignity.

Ms. Chao will be a great leader at the Department of Labor, and I look forward to voting in support of her nomination.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume legislative session.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I would like to proceed, if I may, under the order. I believe this time is allotted to us.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming is recognized.

NOMINATION OF GALE NORTON

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, we were talking about confirmation of appointments. Among the next ones that will take place tomorrow will be the Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton. I want to spend a little time talking about the Secretary, but perhaps more as a preliminary matter, I want to talk about the importance of Federal lands and the impact they have on the West in particular. Of course, they are national lands.

First of all, I am very hopeful and confident that Gale Norton will be confirmed. I think she has done an excellent job in responding to the legitimate questions she has been asked. That is the role of the Senate: to inquire, ask questions of these aspiring nominees. She has done, I believe, an excellent job of responding.

She is a superb candidate for this job. She has experience. She has experience as attorney general of the State of Colorado, during which time, of course, she had to deal with a good many land, water, and air quality issues and I think dealt with them professionally.

She is knowledgeable, certainly, about the West. The West is unique—I will talk about that in a moment—where, in many cases, more than half of a State belongs to the Federal Government. It is very important to all of us.

Gale Norton has a background in land use and park use, not only from her experience in Colorado but also her experience in the Interior Department as an associate solicitor for the Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as the Park Service. I have had some occasions to talk with her as chairman of the parks subcommittee.

I certainly have an interest in this job in that this Secretary has jurisdiction over the National Park System. She is certainly a conservative conservationist. We have sometimes gotten into the position where those things seem to be an oxymoron; they seem to be conflicting. Indeed, it seems to me they are not.

She is a conservative and I am a conservative, but we are conservationists in that we want to protect the resources so they will be there in the future for our kids and future youngsters. These two things are not incompatible. Under most definitions, they would be quite compatible. I would substitute conservationist—at least to some we have to be an environmentalist. That perhaps is another step.

In any event, I do believe Gale Norton will be confirmed as Secretary, and I certainly support her nomination. I do want to talk about public lands, since we have some time today.

In my State of Wyoming, nearly 50 percent of the land belongs to the Federal Government in various categories. Some was set aside for national parks. We have two of the most famous national parks, Yellowstone and Grand Tetons. We also have Devils Tower and other facilities as well. Some of the land was set aside for U.S. forests. Much of the land, on the other hand, is BLM land, which really was remaining land after the Homestead Act was finished and lands were taken for private ownership. These were the lands that remained and stayed in Federal ownership.

This map shows the holdings throughout the country. They represent millions of acres—a great deal of public land. In Alaska, 68 percent of the land belongs to the Federal Government. In Nevada—Senator REID was just here—they believe theirs is closer to 87 percent federally owned lands. It goes all the way to New Mexico, the Presiding Officer's State, with about 26 percent.

They are very important. Not only are they important because they are public lands and they are great treasures that we want to preserve, but of course they have a great deal to do with the way we live. They have a great deal to do with our economy. They have a great deal to do with our culture.

Those who live there often talk about public lands, and I understand people in Maryland or people in Connecticut often are not quite as familiar with the fact that we have millions of acres that are either mountains or high plains.

When we talk about those things, there is not much recognition of what the problems are. I suppose we are guilty of the same thing with regard to coastal lines. We do not have coastal lines in Wyoming. We need to talk about some of these things so we will better understand them.

I am very interested, of course, in the parks. I grew up right outside Yellowstone Park in Cody, WY. The park is one of the real treasures of this country. It seems to me the purpose of the park is to protect those treasures. The second purpose is to allow the owners, the American people, to enjoy them, and, from time to time, how we do that becomes somewhat controversial.

These places are unique, and some are managed for a single purpose: wil-

derness areas. I support wilderness areas. They are set aside and restricted as to how they can be used.

I hope we do not change the old sign of the Forest Service which said "Land of many uses," to what some would like to change it to: "Land of no uses." I do not believe that is where we ought to be headed, and I do not believe that is where our Secretary of the Interior will be heading.

There are many uses for which the land should be made available, not all economic. There is hiking and camping. You would be surprised by the number of letters I receive, when we talk about the roadless areas, from veterans organizations. Some of our disabled veterans are not going to have access to these lands if we do not provide it. Not only are there resources there such as grazing and timbering, but also recreational access, of course, is most important.

We also need to understand that these resources do need to be managed. We had this year probably the most devastating series of forest fires on public lands in the West. Managing those forests more in terms of access if there is a fire, in terms of thinning to prevent fires, is a very important issue.

We have a unique relationship with the Federal Government because of this involvement. Generally, it is a pretty good relationship. Interestingly enough, often the relationship with regard to the forest and BLM lands is pretty good on the local level with the staffs that are doing the actual work, but when you get to the policy level, the regional level, the national level, that coordination and cooperation seems to become more and more difficult.

We need to find some ways to make the Government a better neighbor to the people of the West so that we can work together. There has been a promise on the part of this administration, and particularly on the part of Gale Norton, to work more closely to involve local people and local governments in management of these lands.

One of the things that has happened, and needs to happen more, and at least be done more effectively and efficiently, is what is called a cooperating agency agreement where, when you have an EIS or study on a particular change of a regulation, why, the surrounding States, the surrounding counties, officials can be brought in as cooperating members and cooperating agencies to help make these decisions. It is true they are Federal lands and the final decision rests with those agencies, but the people who live there ought to have some input, and we hope that can be the case.

Throughout this past administration, it was more difficult. I understand the Secretary of the Interior and the last President were seeking to make some history for themselves, some legend in terms of setting aside public lands. Much of that was done without any commitment or involvement of local people at all.