

Oral History Cover Sheet
Department of Interior
Employee Meeting with James “Jim” Watt

Summary: Jim Watt speaking to his new Department of the Interior employees, concerning Alaska and how the land will be used. Defending his policies to his cabinet and providing them with resources to do the same, followed by opening up the floor for questioning.

Keywords: Alaska Land Use Council, Wildlife refuges; Wildlife restoration; Wildlife management; Wildlife impacts; Threatened species; Sub-polar environments; Policies; Personnel; Performance; Parks;

Jim Watt:

Thank you very much. I'm Jim Watt, the new Secretary of Interior, and I appreciate the chance to share with you some of the things that we're doing, and particularly to say thank you. I came to the Department of Interior for President Reagan after serving seven years in the Department. So many of you I have worked with in Washington in years gone by when I was Head of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation or when I was Deputy Assistant Secretary for Water and Power Resources, and some of you I worked with when I was assisting Wally Hickle during his confirmation proceedings, and so I have known the Department of Interior, its programs and its people, and it's given me a real advantage, because I have confidence in the career employee, and as a matter of fact, some of the controversy that I have created is a result of the confidence that I have, and that the very first Monday that I was in the Department of Interior, I invited all of the Presidential appointees of the last administration to leave by 5:00 PM, so that I could turn the Department over to the career employees in whom I have so much faith, and we came and we felt, based on President Reagan's campaign, that the Department of Interior needed to move dramatically from the left, where we had seen an orientation that did not allow the full common sense and balance perspective that I think is resident within the Department of Interior and capable of being carried out. And so we had to give some pretty forceful orders to change the direction of the Department of Interior so that we could bring it from out here in left field to bring it into the main stream of where we want to be, and we have made some strong directives, and we have implemented an MBO program, and we've put together a team of people in Washington that are first rate, and I'm pleased to report that after six months, I am being told by the Governor of Alaska, by the Congressional Delegation of Alaska, by the users of lands in Alaska that you folks are doing a superb job along the lines we have outlined, and I want to thank you for that, because you have heard that there was a change to be realized, and that you have moved in accordance with those changes, and I'm grateful to you for that, because you have made my job successful, and we have been successful this first six months.

Those of you in Fish and Wildlife Service and the Park Service, you folks have taken on a new understanding and a new dimension, to fit into the Alaska

scene with the Alaska Land Use Council that we commenced to yesterday, and I think that with the constructive leadership that you have here in the state, with both Keith and John, who I have great confidence in, that you are moving the way we want to move. For those of you from USGS and the Bureau minds and BLM, never again, I promise you, never again, will you be abused by a Secretary who points the finger and talks about rape, ruin, and run when he talks about your activities. You are professionals, and I honor and respect you for the work that you have done. We are one family in the Department of Interior, and we will not allow, we will not allow those who have tried to demean any one of our professions. We deal with natural resource issues that are tough to deal with. They have tremendous conflicts. There are tremendous contradictions in the statutes. There are tremendous emotional out peals from the people who have very narrow perspectives on what they want to accomplish, but I know, from my seven years of previous work in the Department of Interior, that we have the professionalism and the experience to meld those disciplines and those views and those conflicts and those contradictions into a meaningful, balanced, common sense approach to handling the natural resource problems of this country.

Now, those of you here in Alaska have a special mission, and in fact, a special burden, in that we are the dominant landlord of this state, and we must be careful how we use that power. These lands are to be managed, not just for our enjoyment, but with an eye towards the future, for the many, many generations yet to come. They are to be managed for America. They are to be managed for the benefit of all Americans, so that we can enjoy the beauty and enjoy the wealth of the resources, and we can do both. But immediately, they are to be managed with an eye towards the people and the citizens of the state of Alaska. This is their home. Yes, we're the landlord, but it is their home, and I do not want, nor would any of you want, to manage these lands, that would be detrimental to the people of Alaska who live here now, or who may come to live, or may be born to live in Alaska in the many years to the future, as well as today. So we have a special responsibility to the people of Alaska.

The outpouring of support that I've received in these several hours that I've been in the state, have been gratifying to me, and part of it is a reaction to the past, that I would like to be coming back next year and '83 and '84 and '85 and '86, and still have the same warmth and response that I've had during this visit, and that will be based upon the record that you folks build for the Department of Interior. Now, the warmth that I've received and the tremendous support from the Governor and the Delegation and from the people have really been a support based upon hope that we will continue with the enunciated direction that we have presented, and it's based upon the hope that you folks will continue with your professionalism that you have demonstrated these few months that this new administration has been in power. So I'm grateful to you because you have been responsive, and you've been understanding, and many of you consider yourselves to be Alaskans and you take care of Alaska first, and I think that is great, and I want to encourage that. There need not be conflict, and we should manage these lands in a manner that there would not be an inherent conflict between federal and state interests, because I think we can march forward to enjoy the preservation needs that we have in Alaska, as well as the development needs for both federal and state purposes, and we have given special attention to the state of Alaska in our staffing and in our work.

We have reviewed the heads of the various offices that are here in Alaska, and we are pleased. I have named, as Deputy Under-Secretary, Bill Horne, and Bill is over. Bill, if you would stand. Some of you may have not met Bill Horne, but Bill has worked for the Congressional Delegation on both the House and the Senate side during the fights and battles and successes of the D2 Legislation, and he understands it exceptionally well. He's been to Alaska many times and has worked with several of you, over and over again, and Bill has the lead responsibility in the Office of the Secretary, and we have found him, as has the Congressional Delegation and has the Governor, to be extremely knowledgeable, extremely sensitive, and very professional to the multiple needs. He will not allow himself, nor has he ever, to be sold out to one specific agency versus the others represented here. But he has that view and that broader perspective that all of us want for the Department to

see and to have. We have appointed Vern Wiggins to be our Interior man here in Alaska from the Office of Secretary, and he will wear two hats. In addition to being my personal representative to work with you up here, Vern will also be the Co-Chairman for the Alaska Land Use Council. I'm saying Council. Is it Commission or Council? Council, and Vern and the Governor, Governor Hammond and Vern Wiggins are the two Co-Chairmen for that statutorily authorized and created council, and they commenced to their first meeting yesterday, which I thought got off to a great start, and I'm hopeful that it will be the cornerstone for these federal/state relationships that the President and I are so eager to have. So we think we have a first rate team with the political management group that I've brought into the Department of Interior. We think we have a first rate team of the career professional managers that are here in Alaska, and we think we can merge those two forces to be an effective manager of the public lands.

Now, there has been much abuse and much misrepresentation about some of the programs and policies of the Department of Interior since I came in. I am asking that each of you, each of the Directors and Heads of the offices here in Alaska and your PIO officers, take upon yourself the responsibility to communicate to the people of Alaska about what we're doing. Unfortunately, the distortions of the truth have been so great that there's an opportunity that the people will lose confidence in your professionalism and your ability to protect the land resource, and so I am asking that you identify those abuses of the truth and that the public be allowed to know what the truth is. So number one, if you find that you do not have proper authority to protect the resource base, we need to know about it, and we will give you the authority. I have reviewed personally this subject matter, and I am satisfied, based on the information that my people are giving me, that the proper authority is in your hands to protect the resource in every instance. But if that is not the case, then I'm asking you to identify what additional authority that you need to protect the resource, and we will see to it that it is given to you. Now, when there is the malicious charge that you don't have the authority or that we are turning our back to the resources, and that is not true, then I'm asking that you make yourself available to the radio, the TV, the newspaper people here so

that we can correct that and assure the American people that in fact we are fulfilling our responsibilities under the statutes and that we are being responsive to the needs to take care of the land, and if you will stand strong, based on your professionalism, we will be successful, and we will curb this tide of just overwhelming abuse. I tell you, it's unbelievable, and at first I didn't flinch at it because it was reflected only upon me, but then I realized that there was an opportunity for the erosion of confidence in you, and we cannot allow that to happen, because the resources will be protected, and they will be managed and cared for by us, by the Alaskans, by the state government, and we will see to it that there is the proper care and attention and management and protection of these lands so that we can have them preserved through time, as well as utilized and used for Alaskans and Americans, and that's my goal, and I ask for your continued help, and I want to stress to you how pleased I am at the support you have given.

I'm going to ask that Curt join me, because, here's Curt thank you. Curt has nominated and recommended to us that some awards be given, and I just come along and have the privilege of giving the awards, and I would like to, first of all, Lou Wahler to come up on the stage with Curt, and Lou, if you'd just come up, please. I would like to commend the Magrath Resource Area staff for the outstanding job it did in identifying easements to be reserved across lands being conveyed to the 67 Alaskan Native Village Corporations. I am particularly pleased to be involved in this award, Lou, because I want to demonstrate that the Department of Interior is going to continue with that outreach to the natives of Alaska and that we show the cooperation that they deserve and that Congress intended and that Lou and his people have obviously given to them. I would like to ask that the team members of Lou also stand so that we can recognize the entire team, and the first one I'd like to call upon is Russell Bloom, and rather than just rattle off the names, I'm going to look for you. I want to see good people, other than everybody. Russell, you're right here, good. Clifford <unclear>, Mona Ivy, I think we're going to have your group together, that's good, Ethelyn Taylor, she's doing the work today, huh, Dorothy Tideman, Dorothy, thank you. Brett Wise, and Terry Sharpe. I want to thank you personally, each of you, and be in a

position to hand a certificate to Lou on behalf of all of you, and it's a Unit Ward that I'm pleased to be a party to, and I asked that Curt be with us because he's the one that really made the original recommendation, and I'm proud to be associated, Lou, with you and with your people because I think this is the type of image and work that we all want to be associated with. So Lou, thank you very much for what you and your people have done. I appreciate that.

I have one other nice chore, and that is another award that again, Curt, has recommended, and we have approved, and this deals with that group of people of Land Law Examiners who are working with Willa Mae Shore, were directly involved in the conveyance of the land to the states of Alaska, and the award here is for a commitment to convey 9 million acres of land. Now if we were anywhere other than Alaska, that would sound like a lot of land, but in Alaska, it's not enough. So I asked Curt, I said, "Why are we giving this award today, they've only conveyed 9 million acres", because next year I expect to give an award to someone because you have exceeded our goal of 13 million acres, and so this is just encouragement to boost you along as we move next year to the 13 million target. So Willa Mae, are you, Willa Mae if you'd come up with Curt and me, I'd appreciate it, and I would like to ask Elaine <unclear>, Charlotte Pickering, Elizabeth Bonnell, it works real nice when you folks all sit together, I get to see each one of you, I can even look you in the eye, Barbara <unclear>. I've spoken recently to a group of land men, and they were mostly women, and I was particularly interested in that. These are land law examiners, they're not land men, okay, I appreciate working with this. Dorothy Preston, Dorothy Liggett, Arnold Vanhorne. Let's give a hand for tokenism here. I think tokenism is wonderful when it comes with... Nancy Alex, Mary Nagel, Sharon Rathbun, and Barbara Miller. Let's give a hand for these ladies and our one man. Willa Mae, I get the privilege of handing this to you, and again, I asked that Curt be here. It's the same Unit Award, and I want to thank you for your diligence and your group's diligence in pursuing this. I am, again, pleased to be associated with you. Thank you very much for the good job you've done.

I would like to submit myself to questioning from some of the employees, because there has been a lot of confusion, and I'm trying to make myself available now. I really locked myself up for the first four or five months, and didn't even leave Washington, hardly left my office, because I was committed to make the changes that the President and I thought were essential to a successful America, and because of that, I have not been as good as I should have been in communicating with the American people, with the media, and with the employees, but let me assure you, I've stayed home, and I've done my homework, and I know what I'm talking about, and I'd like to show how smart I am in answering some of the questions that you have here. I don't want to give you too much encouragement, but I'd like to pursue some, and let me assure you that there is no one in this room that can be too rough on me. I've been the Press Corp, and sometimes they're really rough, but I think it would be helpful if those questions that you have and those doubts, some of you have doubts about what I'm doing, and I think it would be healthy for all of us if those would be exposed and you would give me an opportunity to show you that I'm a tremendous salesman, and that when you leave here will be convinced that we are on the right path and that you'll better understand what I really am trying to do on behalf of the President and at his direction, and frankly, with the tremendous support that we've had from Congress, it's been phenomenal. I've made a lot of budget allocations and recommendations on budget cuts.

Speaker:

<unclear>

Jim Watt:

Okay, thank you, Curt. Indeed that is a correct perception. I have been to Alaska on two previous occasions, and the last time I was here was in '76, and I spent a good number of days here. At the time I was Vice-Chairman of the Federal Park Commission, and I was reviewing the proposed alternative routes for the natural gas pipeline, and so during that visit, we flew low and slow over every park of the oil pipeline, and we ate and slept at the construction camps, and we were in Barrow and Dead Horse and across the

Arctic Wildlife Refuge and in Fairbanks, down the <unclear> Highway into Canada and to Valdez, and I covered a significant portion of the state at that time, but I had blinders on. I was looking at the state of Alaska as an energy source with concerns for a delivery system that would get the natural gas to the outside, and I saw it in that capacity and interestingly enough, there were three alternative routes that we flew and reviewed and the two Republicans, myself and the other man, voted for the route that was developed by some of you folks in the EIS process because it was to be the most environmentally sensitive route. The two Democrats, I'm never partisan, you understand, the two Democrats voted the other way. President Carter then bid to accept the recommendation of the two Republicans, and that's the route that we're now working on. So I have asked, and if you'd spent the hours that I did flying in that <unclear> Goose, low and slow, you'd understand why I really didn't want to go north of Fairbanks this time, Curt. I've been there long enough. Maybe next year I'll go up there, but I needed to spend some time in the southeast and the southwest areas. I have been down to <unclear> because of work we did down there when I was here on my first trip, and I've been to the Kenai Moose Refuge. I obviously haven't learned the new words, have I? But I've been there for those areas, but I needed to see a new dimension, and I was particularly interested in being with our employees and the people of Alaska, because no people should be made by a Secretary of Interior in Washington, DC if he's not felt and shared the views of the people of Alaska and been on the land. Coming from Wyoming, I feel you've got to have been there before you can make decisions, and decisions on resources shouldn't be made simply from a paper supply. Another question?

Speaker:

Secretary, you mentioned or eluded to public involvement. We have two citizen advisory councils in BLM, one for each visitor <unclear>, and <unclear> councils are very interested in working with visitors and advising you through the district managers. Can you share some of your feeling and philosophy on that?

Jim Watt:

Sure, thank you. Now these are the ones that are appointed by the Director and the Secretary?

Speaker:

Yes.

Jim Watt:

I sure can. There was a push early in the administration to eliminate those type of advisory groups in an effort to save money, and I fought Dave Stockman in a Cabinet meeting on that very point, because I believe that those are critically important to our success, and so we are going to fully utilize those groups and some of them have been depleted in number, and we will be appointing again to bring those up to full force, because I think it is very important that we have those citizen advisory groups, and we have 139 such groups involving, I forget, how many thousand people throughout the Department of Interior, and I think those are critical and very valuable, and I want to fully support them in every way, and if we don't have the Alaska groups fully filled with the appointees, I'd like to get right on that and do that. So I think they're important to us.

Speaker:

You have a question over here, Mr. Secretary.

Jim Watt:

Fine, thank you.

Speaker:

<unclear> who are concerned about our ability to meet the quality requirements and time requirements. Do you have any comments on that?

Jim Watt:

Yes, thank you. I think maybe I have more faith in career employees than career employees do. I have suggested that we make a significant revision

to the five year plan for leasing of the lands off the outer continental shelf. Under the EIS work that we would be doing, I have asked for substantial new monies for new people to do that work, and I've given a real twist in orientation of funding for the EIS activities, and it's my view that we need to inventory the entire resource base onshore and offshore so that we know the wealth and the value and the extent of the energy potential, the esthetic potential, and all the potentials that we have. Now, in doing that, we would have this broad scale, five year program to make an environmental impact statement for the entire outer continental shelf, and that is a tremendous undertaking, which is the basis for your question, and we think that it can be successfully done. We have spent hundreds of hundreds of millions of dollars in the past years in doing environmental assessment work, and we think that there is a collage, a mosaic that already exists as a basic understructure for understanding the environmental impacts that would be realized from leasing on the outer continental shelf. In addition, we think that we are putting the extra millions of dollars into it that I have allocated in the '82 budget and Congress is indicating its support for to full out and beef up those environmental impact statements for the next five years covering the entire shelf. There is a question as to how good they will be. I am satisfied that we have the capability. My advisors in Washington tell me that we do and that because of the experience that we have, it's not as if you're starting on a brand new effort. We have many years of experience on this general subject, so I'm satisfied that the environmental impact statement work will be very good. We will focus with an additional attention on those areas that have the high interest, and so while we may open up an area with 15 to 20 million acres for an environmental impact study, we will focus with concentrated effort on those areas that receive the most attention. Now my critics are quick to say that I am making a proposal to make available, that's the key word, to make available more land than the oil companies can lease, and I smile, because it's never my intention to make public policy based on Exxon's capability of delivering. Now the past liberals might have done it, but this conservative is not going to do that. I think that we make public policy based upon what's right for the American people and not what Exxon and Shell and Gulf and SOHIO can do, and there is that battle. The capability will

control what the companies want to bid, and they then will have to select, with some priority judgements, those lands that they're willing to put up the money to bid on. If they bid and they...