

Face Time: Otter talks about Western Governors' goals

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The Spokesman-Review

Tags: Butch Otter Face Time nuclear energy veterans Western Governors' Association



Idaho Gov. Butch Otter will mark the end of his term this week as chairman of the Western Governors Association.

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, chairman of the Western Governors Association, will hand over the gavel to the incoming chairwoman – Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire – at the close of this week's annual conference of the 19-state group in Coeur d'Alene. We asked Otter about the direction he's taken the association in the past year and what to expect from the Coeur d'Alene conference.

Q.Why did you take on this role?

A.Quite frankly, I have found a lot more comfort ... and productivity with the Western Governors than any of the other governors organizations. In fact, I quit the National Governors Association (which Gregoire now chairs) two years ago when we were cutting back on all the budgets. I didn't think we really accomplished that much

in the National Governors Association. A consolidated front on Western issues to go to the federal agencies that control a lot of land in the West was also very helpful. And the bipartisan nature of it – we were able to diminish any political lines and be able to draw on the administration, and say, "We're all in this thing together, and it's not a partisan problem, it's a Western problem that we need a Western solution to."

Q.What's it been like for you to work with Gov. Gregoire?

A.She's been a good partner. We meet twice a year, we talk more often than that, and a lot of times we talk through staff at WGA. Where we need a solid front in some national policy and we want the Western view reviewed, Christine has been very, very effective

and very helpful in making sure that we get that face time and that we get answers to our questions.

Q.This week's conference includes a new topic for the WGA, increasing opportunities for returning veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq. Why did you want the WGA to address this?

A.I just felt it was a high priority. We want them to know that as we wrapped our arms around their families when they left, that Idaho's going to do whatever we can, whatever's in our power, whatever's in our authority, to make sure that they have a soft landing when they come home. We're tapping every resource, both federal and state, that we can in order to do just that.

Q.Energy has long been a big focus for the WGA, but you brought new focus this year specifically on industrial energy efficiency.

A.Where we thought we could probably pick the lowest fruit off of the energy conservation orchard would be in that area where most of it's consumed. Industry has responded very, very well. Of course the underlying philosophy here is that if you don't consume it, you don't have to produce it.

Q.You've also brought more focus on nuclear energy development, including holding a WGA conference on the topic in Idaho Falls in April.

A.The real question came to the fore when the tsunami hit Japan. I think, from what I got from that conference, we still see it as a major answer to our future energy needs, our clean energy needs. We can learn from that accident. There's no reason to run from nuclear energy.

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