

Interior secretary shows early promise

By | The New Mexican

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It's a "Western" scene all right — a little like seeing the cavalry come to the rescue in corny old movies:

New interior secretary Ken Salazar has lost little time canceling oil and gas leases on hundreds of thousands of public land around Utah's Arches National Park, Dinosaur National Monument and other sites dear to the hearts of environmentalists — active and armchair varieties alike.

Activists had gone to court to stall Big Oil's rush for leases before the Bush administration left Washington, while one enterprising enviro provided comic relief by blithely bidding up parcels of land when the federal auction took place in late December. Turns out that he had barely enough bucks for a few acres — but the Bureau of Land Management didn't discover his net worth until he'd bid successfully on 164,000 acres.

While aggrieved gas-and-oil guys called for criminal prosecution and snapped up every remaining parcel they could, the sand in the Bush-Cheney hourglass slid away ...

Onto the John Ford-John Wayne scenery strode Salazar, the former Colorado senator — who, with his brother John, the representative from the San Luis Valley, had skirmished against the hydrocarbon interests over industrial ambitions in western Colorado, just up the road from the raid on Utah.

Hold on there, said the secretary; these leases didn't get the right kind of environmental review.

A proper look at the deals is likely to get them called off for good.

And while we're at it, says the cowboy-hatted secretary, let's have a look at America's energy policies as they apply to my stewardship over millions of acres on behalf of all 300 million of us: How much land should be torn up, and water polluted, for the sake of profits?

That's music to the ears of conservationists who, for decades, have sought reform of such piracy promotions as the 1872 mining law and other outdated handouts to well-connected captains of industry.

The enviros' time might have come — but count on the mineral interests' to harp on the need for *more*, not less, exploitation as the solution to our nation's economic woes. Oil-and-gas lobbyists will try framing the debate not only in the tired old terms of "ending dependence on foreign oil," but the fresh ones of "jobs for Americans" — all half-dozen of 'em, once the damage has been done and the fuel flows refinery-ward.

What happens if our high-flying energy companies are denied permits to plunder more public land? Gee, they'll have to drill away on vast stretches of land and sea-bottom they already have under lease. And in the meantime, maybe America will get serious about alternatives to fossil fuel.

We salute Secretary Salazar on this bold and prompt decision — and will watch with interest as he tries

putting together a sensible policy of public-lands protection and energy development.