

Deseret News

Sen. Bob Bennett, Interior Secretary Salazar end spat over oil leases

By [Lee Davidson](#)

Deseret News

Published: Wednesday, May 20, 2009 10:38 p.m. MDT

Sen. Bob Bennett and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar declared a truce Wednesday in their short war over an auction of 77 Utah oil and gas leases that Salazar had rescinded shortly after taking office.

Salazar promised a formal review of his decision, and conceded that the National Park Service had been consulted about the leases auctioned — even though he had complained not enough consultation occurred when he rescinded the sales.

Bennett ended maneuvering that had blocked the confirmation of David Hayes to become the No. 2 official at Interior, which he had earlier vowed to continue until the promised reviews were actually completed. That confirmation was quickly given by the Senate Wednesday evening.

The pair issued somewhat dueling press releases over their truce. Bennett declared that Salazar acknowledged relying on inaccurate information, while Salazar essentially said he will now do what he has offered to do for weeks but Bennett earlier rejected.

Bennett said the failure of Senate Democrats in a vote last week to limit debate on Hayes made Salazar take a closer second look at reasons he used to rescind the auctions.

"The victory on the Senate floor last week elevated this to a high enough level that the secretary began a personal review of the issue and has admitted that the department relied on inaccurate information," Bennett said.

Bennett provided a copy of a letter from Salazar where he wrote that while he had complained that lack of adequate consultation with the National Park Service was a reason he rescinded the auction, he found that some consultation did indeed occur.

"Based on my preliminary review, I have since determined that, in fact, there was consultation between the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) and the NPS, and as a result of that consultation, some parcels close to the national parks and monument were removed from the list of parcels" that were auctioned, the letter said.

Meanwhile, Salazar issued a press release saying he will do now what he has promised for weeks.

"David Hayes, once confirmed, will promptly review the 77 disputed Utah oil and gas parcels, one by one, as I have promised, and we will determine which, if any, are appropriate for development," Salazar said.

Stephen Bloch, conservation director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, complained that Bennett was trying to make it appear that Interior was admitting to more than it was.

"He's trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," he said. "This is the same offer that Salazar made weeks ago — confirm David Hayes and then he will lead a review."

He added, "There really is no inaccurate information that Salazar relied on, just some latent ambiguity about when the National Service was consulted" — which he said came after a proposed list of sales was written, but before the auction actually occurred.

E-MAIL: lee@desnews.com

