

Thompson proposed by colleagues as interior secretary

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKE COUNTY – Could Lake County's congressman become the next secretary of the interior?

Congressman Mike Thompson was reelected to his First Congressional District seat earlier this month by an overwhelming majority. He's due to begin serving his sixth term in January.

However, the 57-year-old Thompson (D-St. Helena) could be moving on up from his Cannon Office Building address in Washington, DC, to a cabinet position if a proposal made this week is considered by President-elect Barack Obama.

Some of Thompson's colleagues in the California Congressional Delegation, including Rep. George Miller (D-Martinez), sent a letter to Obama's transition team asking that Thompson be considered for the Secretary of the Interior post in the new president's cabinet.

"Mike Thompson is immensely qualified to be Interior Secretary," Miller said in a prepared statement. "He has a strong base of support in the conservation, environmental and outdoors community. He is knowledgeable about the issues. And he is a person of great integrity and commitment to public service."

A coalition of conservation and wildlife groups, including Ducks Unlimited, also have reportedly contacted Obama's team to push for Thompson's appointment, according to the Associated Press.

In a statement issued by his office, Thompson said, "It's an honor to be recognized by the many groups I've worked with over the years, but no one associated with President-elect Obama has contacted me."

According to a Friday Washington Post article, there's already another contender for the interior secretary post – Congressman Raul M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.), son of a migrant worker and chair of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, who has an established record on environmental issues.

Thompson, who owns a vineyard in Finley and is an outdoorsman, has a record on conservation issues and protection of endangered species.

His supporters believe that an interview Obama gave Field and Stream magazine, which was published in September, bodes well for a Thompson nomination. In the interview, Obama stated, "I think that having a head of the Department of Interior who doesn't understand hunting and fishing would be a problem. And so my suspicion is that whoever heads up the Department of Interior is probably going to be a sportsman or sportswoman."

One of Thompson's most notable conservation achievements was the passage of the Northern California Coastal Wild Heritage Wilderness Act, which President Bush signed into law in October 2006.

The legislation gave wilderness status to 275,830 acres in the First Congressional District – with 51,671 acres in Lake County, around the Cache Creek and Snow Mountain areas.

Victoria Brandon, chair of the Sierra Club Lake Group, worked with Thompson on the wilderness legislation.

Responding to Thompson's name being put forward for the cabinet posted, Brandon said Friday, "As far as I know the Sierra Club has not taken a position on this possible appointment, and I personally am of two minds: Thompson would undoubtedly be a superb Secretary of the Interior, but the thought of losing him as our Congressman is dismaying to say the least."

On species protection issues, Thompson has been an outspoken critic of the Bush administration, particularly its handling of the Klamath River fish die-off, which claimed an estimated 80,000 salmon.

Thompson and 35 fellow members of Congress from California and Oregon submitted to House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., a request in June of 2007 for an investigation into Vice President Dick Cheney's involvement in policy decisions that resulted in the 2002 fish kill.

He also successfully worked to get legislation passed to assist the struggling salmon industry with more than \$60 million in emergency funding in the summer 2007.

The following month, Thompson and Miller were part of a special congressional panel that convened in Vallejo to look at the issues facing the Bay-Delta.

During the half day of testimony, Thompson questioned a Department of the Interior official at length regarding an administration official's possible interference in policy decisions regarding the delta smelt.

The official, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Operations Manager for the California/Nevada Office Steve Thompson, said he couldn't answer Thompson's question regarding political influence because the Department's Inspector General was investigating the potential manipulation of scientific evidence from the Bay-Delta.

Steve Thompson did say during questioning by the congressman that the investigation involved the former deputy assistant secretary, Julie MacDonald, who had resigned under pressure from another investigation that May.

Congressman Thompson also opposed the Bush administration's July proposal to drill along the Outer Continental Shelf, saying it wouldn't increase the oil supply for years and was potentially disastrous for the ecosystem.

"Our district's coast is rich in marine resources that have tremendous value to our local economy. An oil spill would be devastating to the coastal economy and its unique ecosystem," he said at the time.

Another factor working in Thompson's favor for cabinet consideration is that he and Obama have a track record of working together on issues important to them, and have been of similar mind about their opposition to the handling of the Iraq War.

In January of 2007, Obama and Thompson introduced legislation in the Senate and House, respectively, to get the US out of Iraq. The Iraq War De-Escalation Act set deadlines for redeploying US troops. The legislation did not pass.

Thompson also told Lake County News during an interview last month that he and Obama had a phone conversation on the issue of the financial bailout before a second and final vote was taken to pass the legislation.

Initially, when Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton were running for president, Thompson said either would make a great leader for the country. He formally endorsed Clinton but later embraced Obama after he won the nomination and pledged his support.

Brandon's concern about losing Thompson in Congress broaches an important point – if he were to resign his seat for the cabinet, how would his seat be filled?

The US Constitution requires that, if a seat in Congress becomes vacant resignation, death or refusal to serve, a special election must be held. In the case of the Senate, state legislatures may provide for a state governor making a temporary appointment until a special election is scheduled.

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