

## Scenes from the WGA Conference in Whitefish

# Western Governors Confront Increased Demand for Water, Energy



Governor Brian Schweitzer, center, and fellow western governors listen to Montana native and world champion Los Angeles Lakers basketball coach Phil Jackson, left, deliver a keynote speech during the Western Governors' Association meeting in Whitefish. - Lido Vizzutti/Flathead Beacon

By [Dan Testa](#), 06-30-10

WHITEFISH – The annual conference of the Western Governors' Association, meeting here to celebrate 100 years of its existence, provides state leaders with an amiable environment in which to discuss extraordinarily thorny problems.

The three-day event is a forum for Western governors to confront the issues common to their region, chiefly the questions of how to accommodate growing populations that demand increasing amounts of water and energy, while maintaining the landscapes and wildlife that are the reasons so many Americans migrate to the West in the first place.

It was also an event, however, punctuated by humor, as when Gov. Brian Schweitzer, introducing Phil Jackson, pretended to know what the storied NBA coach's next career move would be.

"This has been a delicate negotiation," Schweitzer, who chairs the association, said. "He has agreed next year he will coach the Whitefish Bulldogs."

The governor was joking, but Jackson did give a speech rife with affection for his time in the Flathead and his love for the region, after which governors and gathered experts discussed the necessity of water adjudication, particularly regarding tribal compacts: demonstrating a sequence that underscored the levity and complexity of the topics on hand. Here are a number of scenes from the WGA's conference in Whitefish this week.

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"As a child I could remember the first fish I caught, at 7 years of age, was on the Middle Fork of the Flathead River," Jackson, who recently won his 11th NBA championship as a coach, told the assembled audience Sunday afternoon during the opening keynote address. It was a rainbow trout, caught with a bamboo pole, and Jackson recalled Teakettle Mountain looming above him on that day.

For a period of his childhood, Jackson's father was a minister in Miles City, and the family would spend summers near Hungry Horse for Bible camps. Jackson fondly described the cold Flathead mornings, occasionally running across a bear and picking huckleberries with his father near the Hungry Horse Reservoir.

"All those are memories that I have of my childhood in Montana," Jackson said.

Years later, when his family moved to North Dakota, Jackson was sorry to go.

"Moving to North Dakota's not an easy thing for a kid of 12 years old," he said. "Coming back here was always a priority in my life."

In 1972, Jackson bought a van and "decided to traipse around" the West, but was drawn back to Flathead Lake. The next year, he rode cross-country on a motorcycle, but found himself, again, camping on the shores of the lake. With some of his extra money from being on the championship 1973 New York Knicks, Jackson bought a piece of land on the lake. He would bring his family out to the Flathead every summer he could, teaching his kids to canoe on Bowman Lake in Glacier National Park.

"It just became part of our life to maybe go camping and teach these kids about being on the earth, about being part of it," Jackson said.

Jackson managed to make it back to the Flathead every year – even while coaching. But in recent decades, Jackson said he noticed the increasingly warm temperatures during his summers in the Flathead, and the more frequent wildfires throughout the area. He urged the governors to work toward policies that are more respectful of the environment.

"Things beyond our control are changing our environment, but we have to make the changes that can help it along," Jackson said. "We call this place the last best place on earth, but we don't know how long it's going to last."

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In a discussion about the demand for water outstripping supplies, Robert Glennon, author of, "Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What to Do About It," assailed many state governments, like Georgia's, for not taking more drastic conservation steps following the severe drought there.

"This is about the health of the American economy," Glennon said. "We may fret about running out of oil, but water lubricates the American economy just as oil does."

The problem is compounded, he added, by the fact that many Americans are migrating from the coasts, where water is more abundant, to Western cities, where it's scarce. Developing renewable energy sources, like ethanol and solar power, he added, also use vast amounts of water.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, of Idaho, asked whether settling water rights with tribes should be a top priority.

"Unless and until these tribal rights are quantified," Susan Cottingham, of the Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission, answered. "It is this uncertainty hanging over all the other water rights."

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New transmission lines and a level playing field for different forms of energy production are conditions critical to developing new power sources in the West: That was the consensus by a panel of energy experts and Western governors discussing the future of energy technology Monday morning.

Vinod Khosla, who invests in new technologies, predicted drastic change in the U.S. energy sector, particularly regarding efficiencies and alternative energy.

“When technology shifts so much you can’t make forecasts, and the experts are almost certainly wrong,” Khosla, founder of Khosla Ventures, said. “The way things change is dramatically and rapidly.”

Other experts advised the governors to set low carbon standards for electricity, as opposed to proposed federal legislation that would raise the price of fossil fuels to make alternative fuels more competitive.

“Environmentalists are pretty good at identifying problems; they’re terrible at finding solutions,” Khosla said.

Schweitzer and other governors emphasized that new transmission lines must go up, and some of that is likely to happen on public land – a concept traditionally opposed by environmental groups.

“The valleys are filling up,” Schweitzer said. “It does make sense to put more of it on public land.”

At the conference, the WGA issued a “roadmap” for potential energy developers on how to navigate local, state and federal permitting bureaucracies