

Big names decline to attend energy symposium

BEN NEARY - Associated Press writer | Posted: Thursday, October 15, 2009 12:00 am |

CHEYENNE -- Several top government officials have declined the state of Wyoming's invitation to speak at a symposium later this month on energy issues in the West.

Wyoming is paying for lawmakers from 14 states to travel to the Western States Energy and Environment Symposium in Jackson. The state has budgeted more than \$400,000 for the event Oct. 25-27.

Wyoming invited U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu, U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and New Mexico Sen. Jeff Bingaman, chairman of the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Each has declined.

Catherine Zoi, assistant secretary for energy efficiency and renewable energy at the U.S. Department of Energy, now is scheduled as keynote speaker for one night at the symposium.

Robert Stavins, a professor at the Environment and Natural Resources Program at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, is scheduled to give another keynote address. He's the author of several books on the economics of energy and is being paid to attend.

Wyoming House Speaker Colin Simpson, R-Cody, was the main sponsor of legislation to create the symposium. He said Wednesday he's pleased with the way the conference is shaping up.

"I'm glad we've got somebody coming from the Department of Energy," Simpson said. "I thought that the secretaries were a long shot coming. We do have an assistant secretary coming, and that's great."

Simpson said the conference will focus on how to improve energy systems on regional and local levels.

State Rep. Tom Lubnau, R-Gillette, is on the committee organizing the event. He emphasized that it is succeeding at its main goal of bringing state lawmakers together from across the West.

"The folks that we wanted to come are all coming," Lubnau said Tuesday. "It would have been nice to have had some of the federal folks, but the focus of this program is on states working to solve states' problems."

Lubnau bristled at questions about the significance of the symposium's failure to draw top federal officials.

"Don't focus on the window dressing when you can focus on the substance, and the substance is all there," Lubnau said. "I'm real encouraged by the panels, and I'm real encouraged by the quality of the leadership. The people we wanted to come are all coming."

Lubnau said 14 of the 15 western states invited to attend are sending substantial delegations. "And we've got panels with some of the world's foremost experts coming to educate people from those states," he said.

Although New Mexico had planned to send a delegation of legislators, Lubnau said the state canceled because the symposium will be going on at the same time as a special legislative session on budget issues.

Jude McCartin, spokeswoman for Bingaman, said Tuesday that the senator appreciated the invitation to the symposium, "but given the very busy Senate schedule, it was impossible for him to accept," she said.

Lubnau said Energy Secretary Chu said he was unable to come because work is ongoing in Congress on energy bills. Lubnau said Interior Secretary Salazar also said his schedule didn't allow him to participate.

Lubnau said the symposium is structured so that each state will develop concrete plans of how they can take control of their own destiny on energy issues. He said he's looking forward to seeing the results of bringing so many talented people together to work on the issues.

The other states participating in the symposium are Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington.