

WBR ARTICLE

Gov steps up presence in nation's capital

By Dennis E. Curran

May 1, 2009 --

CHEYENNE - Back in the 1980s, then-Gov. Mike Sullivan was a frequent flyer to Washington, D.C., to advocate for Clean Air Act amendments that would help Wyoming's low sulfur coal industry.

These days, Gov. Dave Freudenthal is back in the nation's capital battling for both a continued future for Wyoming's coal industry and for the state's growing portfolio of renewable energy fuels.

Like "The Accidental Tourist," Freudenthal is a somewhat reluctant traveler who much prefers the quieter pace of his native Wyoming to the frenzied world of Inside-the-Beltway politics, but he doesn't feel he has much choice.

"Whoever's governor, to the extent there are key issues affecting Wyoming, they end up going to D.C.," he said in an interview with the Business Report.

"I think, unfortunately, I'm going to find myself back there more than I want to be, more than I historically have been.... I just think there are so many large issues that affect us that we've got to go back and do the best we can," he said.

Right now, the key issues include clean coal technology, carbon capture and sequestration, and coal-to-liquids projects. With the new Obama administration moving quickly on climate change initiatives that could have great impact on Wyoming's coal industry, Wyoming's governor wants a seat at the table.

"We're trying to read and understand this 647-page cap-and-trade bill, because we intend to participate in those discussions," he said.

He and his staff already have been involved in discussions about electricity transmission lines and use of federal stimulus money to help utilities leverage money to build "right size" transmission lines up front so there will be capacity for future increases in capacity.

Busy trip schedules

When the governor traveled to Washington in late March, it ostensibly was to make the keynote address to the World Coal-to-Liquids 2009 Conference at the historic Mayflower Hotel, just a few blocks from the White House. But that almost seemed like a sidelight, given the governor's schedule on that day.

By the time he spoke at the conference, Freudenthal and his chief energy advisor Rob Hurless already had held meetings with Energy Secretary Stephen Chu; former Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner, who is now President Obama's energy czar; Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee; and David Hawkins of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

After his speech, the governor and Hurless met with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., who chairs the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

The night before, they had meetings with White House Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Messina, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, and Karen Wayland, energy and environmental policy advisor to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Transmission lines were the primary topic in most of those meetings, Hurless said, but Freudenthal's list of talking points covers the whole range of Wyoming energy issues.

The governor said he tries to keep the trips short but as tightly scheduled as possible.

"I try to get it packed so that I get as much done as I can," he said. "I figure if I have to be there, I might as well be working, because it isn't any fun anyway. We tried to make sure our participation was substantive, and not just sort of just railing, although part of me wants to do that, too."

Carbon merchants

"I think on coal, it's kind of an interesting response. To some degree, it's the traditional 'here come the carbon merchants.' On the other hand, there's a set of people who I think really do want to hear what you have to say."

The governor singled out Energy Secretary Chu as one of those who asked particularly probing questions. Chu was involved with coal gasification research as head of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California before his appointment.

Freudenthal said his friend and colleague, West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin, have compared notes about their reception as the nation's two biggest coal producing states and find they get similar responses.

"The one advantage that we have compared to West Virginia is that we've got such a remarkable wind resource, so that we're able to blend both renewables and traditional fuels," he said.

"We were clearly a leader in the traditional energy economy, and we can be a leader in the new energy economy," he added. "We have the portfolio to be a fairly aggressive participant."

In addition to producing more than a third of the nation's coal, Wyoming is a leading producer of natural gas, oil and uranium and soon will be a leader in wind energy as well.

Multiple energy role

Freudenthal is convinced Wyoming will be a player in virtual every energy scenario.

"What I don't know is - and any governor has the same experience - you never know whether you're doing any good or not. But I do know that I'm not doing any good if I'm at least not on the playing field," he said.

The same is true, he said, of attending National Governors Association meetings and other similar gatherings. "Sometimes I feel like the only reason I and some of the governors go to the national conferences is to make sure the big states don't roll over the little states on funding allocations."

But Wyoming's governors can point to some successes. Sullivan, for example, worked hard to help dissuade Congress from requiring scrubber technologies on coal-fired power plants back in the 1980s, a development that helped spur the rapid development of Wyoming's low-sulfur coal.

Freudenthal acknowledged Sullivan's role but also credited then-Sen. Alan K. Simpson for helping craft the language that facilitated fuel switching to utilize low-sulfur coal.

"He played a pivotal role," Freudenthal said of Simpson. "What he did back there really made a difference in terms of the coal industry in Wyoming."

These days, the nation's leading coal state is fighting for survival of one of its top industries in a world where coal is becoming increasingly less popular. Coal provides for almost half of this nation's electricity, and Wyoming is working hard to ensure that the coal industry remains viable.

Freudenthal said Wyoming can be proud of its efforts to be on the leading edge of developing carbon capture and sequestration legislation, partnering with General Electric on clean coal research, supporting coal-to-liquid conversion and a variety of other projects, and focusing on how to develop the state's wind resources.

"We have a good story to tell, and I'm proud to tell it," Freudenthal said. "Now not everybody wants to hear it, but that's who we are."