

Western political leaders gather for conference

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By The Associated Press

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CHEYENNE - The American governors and top Canadian officials meeting for the Western Governors' Association conference won't have to look far for concrete examples of the energy, water and wildlife issues that dominate this year's agenda in Jackson Hole.

Fifteen governors and four Canadian premiers were scheduled to attend the annual meeting starting Sunday in Wyoming, the least populated U.S. state and a land where concerns over energy development, wildlife habitat and water supply top the political agenda.

"Wyoming is ground zero for questions about balancing energy development and wildlife habitat," said Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal, the chairman of the association. "These are issues that are critically important to Wyoming, and are also of concern to the rest of the states represented in the Western Governors' Association."

More than 500 participants have registered for the meeting, representing industries ranging from energy to transportation, pharmaceuticals and retail, along with numerous environmental and other special-interest groups.

"I don't know if it's the location or the issues or Governor Freudenthal's leadership over the year, but this is the first year we've ever sold out a meeting," said Chris McKinnon, a senior policy adviser for the association. "We've got more governors and more premiers than ever coming before. It's the largest turnout we've had."

The three-day event features keynote speeches from U.S. Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, General Electric Co. Chairman and CEO Jeff Immelt, NBC News special correspondent Tom Brokaw and Erik Peterson, senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The heads of state will meet for four plenary sessions: "Protecting Wildlife Corridors in the West," and "Transmission Expansion - When, Where, How Much?" both moderated by Freudenthal; "Managing Water in the West," moderated by Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano; and "Energy and Climate Change," moderated by Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman.

McKinnon said the governors will discuss and take final action on three reports that have been developed over the past year by working groups made up of various stakeholder groups. This year's reports focus on wildlife corridors, water and producing power from coal with near-zero carbon emissions.

The governors will also decide on about 20 policy resolutions, covering regional issues such as drought and transportation, McKinnon said.