

# A Burst of Energy For Natural Resources?

By Margaret Kriz Hobson, CQ Staff

Doc Hastings, a 69-year-old former paper executive from Washington state, has kept a low profile during his 16 years in the House, working on the lesser-known Rules and ethics committees and earning a reputation as a party loyalist. But as the 112th Congress prepares to convene, Hastings is stepping from the background into the spotlight as incoming chairman of the Natural Resources Committee. And his profile of late has been anything but low.



In the days before the Thanksgiving break, Hastings stunned some veteran Republicans by making a play for the energy policy portfolio now held by the Energy and Commerce Committee. He called that panel — which has broad jurisdiction over health care, telecommunications, technology and consumer protection, in addition to energy and environment concerns — a “Goliath” that should be cut down to size in the interest of “leveling” the distribution of power in the chamber.

**IT’S A NATURAL:** Hastings’ grab for energy policy would alter the balance of power among committees. (CQ ROLL CALL / TOM WILLIAMS)

Energy and Commerce, of course, is fighting back. In a letter straining for restraint, all 18 Republicans told soon-to-be-Speaker John A. Boehner of Ohio that going along with Hastings would be “the worst possible way to answer the American people’s cry for transparency,” an “inside-Washington deal that ferrets jurisdiction away from committees that have proven their moxie and sends it to committees that haven’t experienced a true partisan fight in the past two years.”

Meanwhile, two lawmakers, Joe L. Barton of Texas and Fred Upton of Michigan, are battling for the Energy and Commerce gavel, each purporting to be more conservative than the other.

The full House Republican Conference will vote on Hastings’ proposal to transfer authority for energy issues to the Resources panel in the coming weeks. And even if the Republicans don’t expand Hastings’ legislative reach, his unexpected and bold power grab signals that his mild-mannered days may be past and that he intends to put his stamp on federal energy policy.

Lobbyists for the oil, gas, and other resource-extraction industries couldn’t be happier at the turn of events. They see Hastings as one of them — an understanding Westerner who will stop the Obama administration from limiting commercial activity on public lands.

“Congressman Hastings has been a strong advocate of multiple use of federal lands, not only for oil and gas activity but for mineral, recreation, agriculture and other uses that are really the lifeblood of the Western economies,” said Dan Naatz, vice president of federal resources at the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

Environmentalists, on the other hand, are bracing for the worst, while hoping to be able to work with him. “He’s never been supportive or sympathetic to environmental issues,” said Seattle activist Bill Arthur, deputy national field director for the Sierra Club. Hastings has one of the lowest lifetime environmental voting records in the House, according to the League of Conservation Voters.

While representing his home state’s eastern Columbia River Valley, Hastings has favored farm-irrigation projects over endangered species protection. He has opposed calls from environmentalists to knock down

hydroelectric dams in the name of restoring salmon populations. Hastings supports building new nuclear power plants and has regularly sided with congressional coal-state advocates in their battles with environmentalists over limits on mountaintop mining and pollution from mining and power plant operations. He also backs oil and natural gas development on the East and West coasts despite strong opposition in his home state.

One issue where he and environmentalists have agreed is his steadfast support for cleaning up the federal government's Hanford Nuclear Reservation, a decommissioned nuclear production complex on the Columbia River, which is in his district.

## **FROM MINOR TO MAJOR**

If the Republican Conference gives Hastings what he wants, the Natural Resources Committee will be elevated from its status as a minor panel to a major player on national energy and environmental policy. As currently configured, the Resources panel has jurisdiction over the national parks; water resources; and commercial activity, recreation and environmental preservation on federal lands. By contrast, Energy and Commerce is a megalith.

In a letter laying out his reorganization proposal, Hastings argued that the changes would be only fair to freshman GOP lawmakers. Moving energy issues to the Resources Committee would allow more House members the opportunity to "serve on committees overseeing the top priorities of our conference and the nation," he wrote. Hastings also played on the anti-Obama sentiments that dominated Republican campaigns during midterm election, noting that Energy and Commerce had produced the unpopular "Obamacare" health care overhaul and a House-passed measure that would have created a cap-and-trade program to limit atmospheric carbon emissions as a way to address climate change.

Whether the Resources panel strengthens its energy muscle may well depend on the votes of the at least 86 new GOP members, who will make up more than a third of the Republicans in the House. It will also hinge on whether Hastings' proposal is embraced by the GOP leadership.

"It's always safest to say nothing is going to happen on these things," said Chris Deering, a George Washington University political science professor. "But to have it go this far certainly seems to imply there is some leadership complicity." Aides to Hastings said he talked with Boehner before beginning his jurisdictional quest. But Boehner is remaining officially neutral in the debate.

At a news conference last week, Boehner said he thought it was "appropriate for a new majority to look at how we can best do our work on behalf of the American people." And while he didn't "have a position on this," Boehner said "the conversation that is under way that involves virtually half of our committees is a dialogue that we should have."

Turf battles are nothing new in Congress. The Energy and Commerce Committee is itself the product of years of relentless territorial expansion, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s under the chairmanship of Michigan Democrat John D. Dingell, considered a master turf tactician until he was toppled from committee power in 2006 by Henry A. Waxman of California.

And even if Republicans were to shift some or all energy policy jurisdiction to Natural Resources, the Energy and Commerce panel would probably retain oversight over environmental policy. And because the two issue areas are now inextricably linked in Congress, the jurisdictional split would potentially set up a clash between the two committees.

Regardless, Hastings says he will use his perch at Natural Resources to hold the administration's feet to the fire on a variety of oil and land-use issues near and dear to conservatives' hearts. He plans oversight

hearings on the government's handling of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and the continued slowdown in gulf drilling permits. He will also grill White House officials who rewrote an oil-drilling safety report to make it appear that federal scientists supported the president's decision to halt new deep-water drilling projects in the gulf before the spill was capped.

Hastings also expects to develop oil spill legislation that departs from a Democratic-sponsored package passed this summer by the House. Oil industry executives protest that the liability provisions in that measure are onerous and would discourage new drilling in the gulf.

American Petroleum Institute president Jack Gerard described the House-passed bill as "unacceptable and extreme." Gerard said Hastings "understands the oil and gas industry," unlike the Democrats who controlled the House for the past four years.

The Washington Republican promises to probe proposals by the Interior Department to preserve large swaths of public lands without first getting congressional input. In February, Republicans obtained internal administration correspondence that outlined recommendations to convert 14 sites into national monuments under the Antiquities Act. That law allows the president to restrict use of federal lands simply by issuing an executive order. Among the potential candidates were Washington state's San Juan Islands.

Hastings said the Interior proposals were a slap in the face to Westerners struggling to recover from the recession. "Those of us in the West are particularly sensitive to this because people make a living off of federal lands," Hastings noted. "And if all of a sudden, without input from local people, agencies are going to put the land into more restricted use, I think people there need to know that."

Hastings and other Western Republican members of the panel are still angry with Bill Clinton, who while president created national monuments in southern Utah and other Western states without getting input from local residents. Clinton's actions fueled charges that the federal government was waging a war on the West and helped the Republicans win control of Congress in 1994.

Utah Republican Rob Bishop, who is in line to become chairman of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, says Obama is doing the same thing.

"You get the feeling that there are people in the Interior Department who are back here in windowless offices in Washington that view the West as simply a backdrop for a John Wayne movie," said Bishop, chairman of the Congressional Western Caucus. "They don't realize that there are real people and real lives that are being impacted by these decisions."

Hastings does try to distance himself from the GOP team that took control of Congress 16 years ago and brought him to Washington. The chairman of the Resources panel at the time was Don Young of Alaska, a former riverboat captain who is still the No. 2 Republican on the panel.

Young's Capitol office looked like a quintessential hunting lodge, festooned with animal heads and Alaska memorabilia. And he boasted that he would force environmentalists to negotiate a total overhaul of the Endangered Species Act — or he would "ram it down their throats."

Young was never able to rewrite the endangered species or other environmental laws. And some question whether Hastings can do much better. But Hastings, whose modest personal space might be mistaken for an insurance sales office, says the current Republican leadership has matured since those first days in charge.

## **'INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY'**

“In 1995, Republicans controlled the House for the first time in 40 years. There was nobody in the Republican Conference that had served in the majority,” he said in an interview. “So we didn’t know all of the — for lack of a better word — pitfalls of being in the majority. I think it’s a whole lot different this time because we’ve only been out of the majority for four years and there’s a lot of institutional memory about what went right and what we did wrong.”

Clearly, he said, “we are better positioned to govern in this new Congress than we were in 1995.”

The jury is out on whether Hastings, like Young, might try to force his conservative proposals down the throats of environmentalists and their Democratic allies.

During the past two years, the committee’s chairman, Democrat Nick J. Rahall II of West Virginia, has pushed to passage a steady stream of legislation to protect public lands and expand existing wilderness areas.

Many of those proposals had Republican as well as Democratic support, the Sierra Club’s Arthur notes.

While worried that Hastings isn’t a natural ally, some environmental activists are waiting to see how he acts as chairman.

Said Arthur of Hastings’ style: “I don’t believe he’s as ideologically rigid as Don Young or Richard Pombo,” the California Republican who was chairman of the committee from 2003 until 2007. “The question is, when he steps into this leadership role, will he actually become a leader, or will he default to the party of no” and block legislation to restrain commercial activity on some public lands?