

Introduction



The last day of the Thirtieth Congress, March 3, 1849, was also the eve of President-elect Zachary Taylor's inauguration. The House of Representatives and the Senate were busy at work on two bills: the first, to find a formula for giving the newly acquired territory of California a civil government. The second, no less contentious, was also related to the recent enlargement of the national domain: legislation to create a Cabinet agency known as the Home Department, or Department of the Interior. The bill to create such a Department passed the House of Representatives on February 15, 1849. Two weeks later, the bill reached the Senate floor and late in the evening of March 3rd, the Senate voted 31 to 25 on the House-passed bill. President Polk was waiting in the Senate chambers and signed the bill creating a Department of the Interior.^{1/}

In 1849, when the Congress created the Home Department, it charged Interior with managing a wide variety of programs. In the last half of the 19th century, these programs ran the gamut of overseeing Indian Affairs, exploring the western wilderness, directing the District of Columbia jail, constructing the National Capital's water system, managing hospitals and universities, improving historic western emigrant routes, marking boundaries, issuing patents, conducting the census, and conducting research on the geological resources of the land.

Following the conservation movement at the beginning of the 20th century, there was an increasing sense of the fragile nature of this country's natural resources. Accordingly, the Department's mission focused primarily on the preservation, management, understanding, and use of the great natural and cultural resources of the land.

Today, the Department manages the Nation's public lands and minerals including providing access to public lands and the Outer Continental Shelf for renewable and conventional energy; is the steward of 20 percent of the Nation's lands including national parks, national wildlife refuges, and the public lands; is the largest supplier and manager of water in the 17 western States and a supplier of hydropower energy; and upholds Federal trust responsibilities to Indian Tribes and Alaska Natives. It is responsible for migratory wildlife conservation; historic preservation; endangered species conservation; surface-mined lands protection and restoration; mapping, geological, hydrological, and biological science for the Nation; and financial and technical assistance for the insular areas.

Interior's budget covers a broad spectrum of activities, both to protect the Nation's resources and to ensure equity in their use. These activities include: operation of the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service; land management responsibilities of the Bureau of Land Management; delivery of quality services to American Indians and Alaska Natives; OCS management responsibilities of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement; research, data collection, and scientific activities of the U.S. Geological Survey; water management projects of the Bureau of Reclamation; regulatory responsibilities and reclamation activities of the Office of Surface Mining; and support for U.S. Territories and other insular areas.

^{1/} Robert Utley and Barry Mackintosh, *The Department of Everything Else: Highlights of Interior History*, 1988, pp 1-2.