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Watt: 'The time has come to step down'

By Martin Crutsinger
The Associated Press

Washington — Interior Secretary James Watt resigned Sunday, ending three weeks of uproar over his latest verbal gaffe and a stormy 2½-year career as manager of the nation's land and natural resources.

Watt, his voice quavering at times with emotion, stood in a cow pasture in California and told reporters "the time has come" to step down.

"It is my view that my usefulness to you in this administration has come to an end," Watt said in his letter to President Reagan, who accepted the resignation "reluctantly."

In a statement issued by the White House, Reagan said Watt would stay in office until a successor is confirmed by the Senate. Reagan said Watt had done "an outstanding job as a member of my Cabinet and in his stewardship of the natural resources of the nation."

In their statements, neither man mentioned Watt's remark about "a black, . . . a woman, two Jews and a cripple" that touched off the latest controversy of the secretary's tenure.

But Watt, speaking to reporters at a ranch near Santa Barbara, Calif., where he has been secluded for five days, conceded that the remark "did accelerate" his departure.

Watt said the letter had been personally delivered to Reagan at Camp David at 6 p.m. EST, less than an hour after he called the president to

inform him of his decision.

When asked by reporters, Watt declined to say whom he preferred as a successor. Names that have been mentioned most frequently in recent days include former Sen. Clifford Hansen, R-Wyo.; Energy Secretary Donald Hodel; Rep. Manuel Lujan, R-N.M., and Interior Undersecretary J.J. Simmons III.

The search for a successor and confirmation hearings in the Senate will likely take weeks.

After meeting with reporters, Watt and his wife Leilani climbed aboard their horses for a ride around the ranch where they have been in seclusion since last Wednesday pondering their future.

Watt was controversial from the moment he took office in January 1981, made remarks at one time or another that offended American Jewish groups, Indians, liberals and his favorite targets — environmentalists.

But it was Watt's comment on Sept. 21 to a Chamber of Commerce breakfast about the members of a coal advisory commission that prompted demands for his resignation from the core of his Republican support on Capitol Hill.

Watt wrote an abject apology to Reagan and then dropped out of public sight, only to watch as a mounting chorus of Democrats and Republicans called for him to go.

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Gabe Stepetin of St. Paul Island and his wife, Zenia relax at the Anchorage home of Flore Lekanof during a stopover on their way to Great Falls, Montana, to visit two grandchildren. Along with other residents of the Pribilofs, the Stepetins recently received \$6500 as part of the "corned-beef" settlement they won in a suit against the government. For decades, the U.S. government held the Pribilovians in a state of servitude to harvest fur seals. For complete story, see next weeks issue of Tundra Times.

Watt resigns

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Watt on Sunday called presidential counselor Edwin Meese III, his staunchest supporter among Reagan's inner circle, and asked to speak to the president. Meese put Watt through to Reagan at Camp David.

"I don't think any Cabinet member has done more than he had toward achieving the president's goals," Meese said.

In accepting the resignation, Reagan said Watt "feels that he has completed the principal objectives that he and I agreed upon when he became

secretary of the interior."

Watt "has initiated a careful balance between the needs of people and the importance of protecting the environment," Reagan said. "His dedication to public service and his accomplishments as secretary of the interior will long be remembered."

As recently as last Wednesday, Reagan was defending Watt, declaring that his statement was a "stupid" remark but was not an impeachable offense.