

Watt says stay away from 'posey sniffers'

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Interior Secretary James Watt told top department officials Tuesday that he would prefer that they put themselves off limits to paid leaders of national environmental groups, a Watt aide said.

Douglas Baldwin, Watt's chief spokesman, said Watt told his top appointees at a meeting that he has stopped meeting with national employees of environmental groups because they distorted his

views and were only interested in using the meetings for their own political purposes.

Baldwin said Watt told the officials he would prefer that they follow his lead, but that he did not order them to cut off such contacts.

However, environmentalists disputed this account of the morning staff meeting. They said sources at the Interior Department told them Watt wanted not only his political appointees, but all employees of the Interior Department, to

stop meeting with national environmental leaders.

William Turnage, executive director of the Wilderness Society, said Watt was apparently retreating from the more sweeping position because his staff was "trying to dampen what was obviously a very serious gaffe on his part."

"He is saying that a whole segment of America has no legitimacy. That we are somehow outcasts and that government officials cannot meet with legitimate public groups."