

With friends like Watt who needs enemies?

By JACK HESSION

Interior Secretary James Watt's so-called "good neighbor" policy has been in effect for six months now, with the following results: members of Congress, environmental groups, and American Indians are calling for his head.

California has won the first round of a lawsuit opposing Watt's outer continental shelf (OCS) leasing plans for that state. Republican Gov. Jay Hammond of Alaska threatened to file his own legal challenge to the Republican secretary's Alaska OCS scheme, which the state describes officially as "reckless." A large bipartisan majority of the U.S. House of Representatives recently blocked funding for some of Watt's attempts to weaken the National Park System and other environmental laws and policies such as the strip mining law.

And Watt is in deep trouble within his own party, because conservation enjoys strong support among Republicans as well as Democrats. GOP members of Congress do not want to run for re-election next year burdened by Watt's vendetta against the nation's land, air and water.

Watt's policies on Alaska's federal lands have contributed to this widespread, bipartisan, and growing opposition he is encountering. For instance, he recently issued management regulations for the new Alaska parks that in some respects are merely weak and in others are contrary to congressional intent. Among their erroneous provisions is his attempt to allow off-road vehicles in "park areas," an authority not granted him in the Alaska Lands Act. And his provision for access to mining claims is inconsistent with the Mining in the Parks Act.

Arco, Amoco, and Phillips Petroleum received permits to use helicopters for surface geology work this summer in six of the new parks, including four wilderness areas. The permits are of questionable legality under both the Alaska Lands Act and the Wilderness Act.

Greenpeace investigators

have found that the National Park Service is not enforcing small boat regulations in Glacier Bay National Park, which were designed so that endangered humpback whales would return to the bay. No mystery here; as one of his first actions, Watt blocked new, more protective small boat rules proposed by the Carter-Andrus administration.

Watt has also cut funding for planning and management of the national parks. Under the Reagan-Watt budget, skeleton crews will be attempting to "manage" and protect 42 million acres of some of the world's most valuable public land from poachers, miners, squatters, unauthorized off-road vehicle users, and others who will find it convenient that practically no one is minding the store.

The secretary's attitude towards the national wildlife refuges here is equally baleful. In the Alaska Lands Act, Congress established a five-year resource study and seismic exploration program for the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Watt has lifted key program authority from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service — responsible under federal law for managing refuges — and given it to the industry-oriented U.S. Geological Survey. He has ordered the Fish and Wildlife Service to complete its wildlife study at the end of this year, or four years earlier than Congress specified.

He has cancelled negotiations with Canada begun by the Carter-Andrus administration for a treaty to protect habitat of caribou herds that range between both countries. A central feature of the proposed treaty was stringent safeguards for the calving grounds of the Porcupine herd — the very are in the Arctic refuge that Watt and the oil industry are so eager to drill. Villagers of Kaktovik, who depend on the

porcupine herd for subsistence, have joined environmentalists in suing the secretary.

Other public (federal) lands are endangered under Watt's tenure. He has ordered the Alaska Bureau of Land Management office to refrain from wilderness studies on its land, and to establish an oil and gas leasing

schedule that will allow an upland oil and gas lease sale every four months, beginning with this December's 400,000 acre North Minchumina sale. Non-wilderness portions of the wildlife refuges also are subject to Watt's accelerated leasing plans.

In National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), Watt intends to lease 1.5 million acres by year's end, including a large tract crossed by the Western Arctic caribou herd on its way to and from its calving grounds farther west. Villagers of Anaktuvuk Pass have protested the Watt/industry plans to lease in this area, because the villagers hunt the herd as it moves through village lands and the adjacent Gates of the Arctic National Park.

There is another aspect of Watt's feverish leasing plans that has not received much public attention. By offering to lease over 500 million acres of Alaska's outer continental shelf, millions of acres at a time in NPR-A and 400,000 acres every four months on refuge and BLM lands, Watt is flooding the market on behalf of the oil industry, which will be able to pick up the acreage for far less than what a responsible leasing program would bring. Watt is not only risking major damage to Alaska's environment, he is proposing a colossal giveaway of public resources to the multinational oil companies.

During his visit here, Watt will no doubt say he is for better state-federal cooperation. With Governor Hammond, his is sche-

duled to inaugurate the federal-state Alaska Land Use Council, which under the Alaska Lands Act is charged with promoting such cooperation. He's also scheduled to fly over Bristol Bay, site of his most controversial OCS sale proposal. Refuges and state lands flanking the bay are scheduled for a federal-state cooperative land use planning under auspices of the council.

But there is no funding in the Reagan-Watt budget for either the council or the Bristol Bay plan. Instead, Watt has appointed Vern Wiggins, his official representative for Alaska, to moonlight as the federal co-chairman of the council. Wiggins

was previously executive director of the Citizens for the Management of Alaska's Lands, an industry-financed group that lobbied against the Alaska Lands Act.

Behind all the phony rhetoric about "good neighbors" and greater sensitivity to Alaska's needs, lurks the real James Watt, carrying out with missionary zeal his personal and corporate agenda for radical exploitation of all public lands and resources. With "good neighbors" like Watt, Alaska won't need any enemies.

Jack Hession is the Alaska representative for the Sierra Club.