

CABINET APPOINTEE: DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Deb Haaland, an enrolled member of the Pueblo of Laguna and one of the first Native American women to serve in Congress, has been chosen to lead the Department of the Interior. Roy Herrera, a Phoenix-based member of Ballard Spahr's Government Relations and Public Policy and White Collar Defense/Internal Investigations groups, offered his insight into what Ms. Haaland may prioritize in her position.

How do you know Congresswoman Haaland?

"I've known her for a while now. She was the state Democratic Party chairwoman for New Mexico before she ran for Congress, and when she ran for Congress [in 2019], I got to know her through that as well. I've found her to be a really impressive person with a viewpoint that's going to be really new and rare in Washington."

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The Department of the Interior has been criticized in some quarters for treating natural resources as commodities, rather than observing the relationship indigenous groups have with the land. Do you see that changing under her leadership?

"I think so. To understand this, you have to look at the relationship our tribal nations have with their land. You see the Native American community being much more concerned about preserving our lands and protecting sacred sites as well as natural resources. Having a Native American woman in charge, not just of any agency, but an agency that has had a poor relationship with our tribes is a really important thing. It's a really important milestone. Just hearing her nomination acceptance speech and the respect she has for our environment and our lands made me realize to what extent we haven't seen this before."

Congresswoman Haaland is a 35th-generation New Mexican, and it's not often we see people from the Western half of the country in this type of position. Do you anticipate that having a bearing on her decision-making?

“The Department of the Interior has jurisdiction over large parts of our economy and geography. I think a lot of people don’t realize what it does, or give it enough credit. Out West, most of the states do have huge segments that are owned by the federal government. Knowing that, you have an orientation about what land is and how important the management of it is. In New Mexico, you’ve seen a large increase in mining and drilling . That’s been kind of an economic boon. But of course, you have to manage it responsibly. [Congresswoman Haaland] is representing a community that has seen both—the importance of preserving public lands, but also the benefits of allowing for mining and drilling. Finding that right balance is a big thing in the Southwest and West. Picking somebody from a state that is already asking itself these questions is a good choice, because

she’s familiar with the debate and understands the positions.”

What do you think her principle obstacles will be at first?

“One immediate challenge is that a lot of the stuff we think about, like fracking and other kinds of energy projects that are occurring on public lands that were opened up under the Trump administration, are already going on. They’ve been permitted and, in some cases, are underway. So, can those permits be revoked? There’s a whole process for that. She may only be able to emphasize conservation going forward, rather than rolling back what’s approved.”

“[Congresswoman Haaland] is definitely progressive—one of the more progressive choices in the Biden cabinet so far—but when people get into a high-level administrative position like this, they have to accept

a new form of realism. Going back to her New Mexico background, I think she’s the kind of person who can strive to find a balance, rather than insisting on any one single direction.”

“That being said, it’s not as if we’re going from a middle-of-the-road position on these issues to a more progressive stance. We’re going from one end of the spectrum to the other entirely. The shift is going to be so fundamental it’s hard to overstate. From George W. Bush to Barack Obama, I don’t know that we saw that much contrast from ingoing and outgoing administrations. We’re definitely going to see it here. If what we end up with in the Biden administration is more of balance, then we’re in a good place.”



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