



## **Energy Summit Connects Industry, Government**

### **Environmental Groups Decry Event as 'Junket'**

**By Brian Ross, Jill Rackmill and Vic Walter**

**Jan. 13, 2005** -- In a preview of how the Bush administration may be influenced on important energy policies, executives and lobbyists from the oil, gas and mining industries entertained the top Washington officials who regulate them over rounds of golf, expensive steak dinners and a special casino night last week at a lavish Phoenix resort.

The 2005 Business Summit of the West, a three-day event, was co-sponsored by the Western Business Roundtable, whose member companies gave close to \$2 million to Republicans last year, and BIPAC, a pro-business political action committee.

"We have an agenda," said Jim Sims, executive director of the Western Business Roundtable and a former member of Vice President Dick Cheney's energy task force. "We make no bones about it."

### **Behind Closed Doors**

The summit offered companies a rare chance to meet in private with powerful policy makers, including Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton. Her department grants drilling, mining and timber rights on public lands.

Norton declined to speak to ABC News as she left the dinner after her speech.

"Whether it's air regulations or mining regulations or tax policy," Sims said, "we are working every day to try to change policy in Washington and in states for the benefit of the Western region."

Summit meetings were held behind closed doors at the Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa, the self-proclaimed "jewel of the desert." Event organizers said reporters were kept out for fear they might be environmental activists.

Ken Cook, founder and president of the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, called the conference "a junket."

"There's no other word for it," he said. "You go behind closed doors with the power brokers in the oil and gas industry, the mining industry, and you cut deals. And these are deals that unfortunately involve land and resources that belong to the American public and we weren't invited."

## **'Creature of the Industry'**

Taxpayers paid for the travel expenses of Norton and other members of her staff, including her deputy, James Steven Griles, a former industry lobbyist.

"I speak to anybody who asks me to speak to them," Griles told ABC News. "This group is no exception. We go to everyone who are citizens of this country."

Environmental advocates felt differently. "Time and again, Mr. Griles has sided with that industry to weaken environmental laws that are in his purview at the Interior Department," Cook said. "He is pretty clearly a creature of the industry."

A spokesman said the Interior Department's ethics office approved Norton's trip to Phoenix because it was official business. Golf fees were not paid by taxpayers, the spokesman said.

Among those at one of the conference's golf events was former Rep. Charlie Stenholm, a Democrat from Texas who has been a longtime supporter of the energy industry.

Stenholm was defeated in November, but he told ABC News outside the steak dinner that he hoped to have a job soon.

"I'm going to be a lobbyist," Stenholm said.