

Smith, Bruggere wait for final count in close U.S. Senate race

By Brad Cain
The Associated Press

PORTLAND — As the counting of absentee ballots continued, Republican Gordon Smith held onto a lead over Democrat Tom Bruggere in their battle to replace retiring GOP Sen. Mark Hatfield.

But with 500,000 absentee ballots still to be tallied, neither side was declaring victory. It was the nation's only Senate race left undecided in Tuesday's elections.

Smith had 343,300 votes, or 49 percent, to Bruggere's 326,052 votes, or 46 percent, as of late Wednesday.

Final returns are not expected until Friday.

"We like how the trend is going. We're close to being there," an increasingly optimistic Smith told reporters.

However, Smith stopped short of declaring himself the winner of the race and said he wanted to talk with Bruggere before making a public announcement.

The frozen-food tycoon narrowly lost a special election in January for Oregon's other Senate seat, which opened up after Republican Bob Packwood resigned

in disgrace.

Smith's campaign spokesman, Dan Lavey, predicted Smith would have the edge among people who cast absentee ballots.

"Historically, more Republicans have voted absentee in Oregon in part due to aggressive efforts by our party to encourage people to vote at home," Lavey said.

Bruggere was not ready to concede anything and said he remained hopeful.

"This is only an election. Nobody died in the end," Bruggere said.

Oregon has been experimenting with voting by mail. The Senate race was not actually conducted by mail, but one-third of the state's voters, accustomed to the convenience of sending in their vote, decided to cast absentee ballots.

Smith has said jumping into the race to replace Hatfield after losing to Democrat Ron Wyden in January by 18,000 votes out of 1.18 million cast was one of the most difficult decisions he's ever made. Bruggere, founder of a software company, was making his first run for office.

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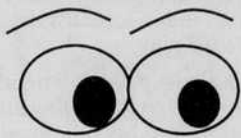
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