

Bonneville Power Administration hires Bryan Mercier

Former Hatfield Fellow returns home after stint in Washington, D.C.

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

For the past three months, Tribal member Bryan Mercier has been a voice for Pacific Northwest Tribes at the Bonneville Power Administration.

The one-time Udall intern and Hatfield Fellow is a Tribal Account Executive for Tribal Affairs at the federal energy agency, a policy adviser in two areas of Tribal interest. The agency works with 46 Tribes and such Tribal agencies as the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

Mercier, 35, acts as liaison between the BPA and Indian communities, and advises the agency on Tribal issues.

"Bonneville puts a huge amount of resources and effort into protecting fish and wildlife affected by hydroelectric dams," Mercier said.

In the past, BPA actions were contested in court and judges ultimately forced changes in policy.

That style has changed.

As part of a new, comprehensive strategy to protect Columbia Basin salmon, BPA, federal agencies, states and Tribes sought to end 30 years of legal wrangling with a collaborative solution. The result was the legally-binding "Memorandum of Agreements" with Tribes, known as the Columbia Basin Fish Accords, Mercier said.

"We decided to enter into the accords with Tribes and states and to work collaboratively on common goals, rather than continue to fight in court," Mercier said.

BPA has agreed to invest more funding into salmon restoration and dam mitigation. Ratepayers may see a slight increase in their bills later this year, but from Mercier's perspective, "Any time we're spending money on fish instead of lawyers, you know we're doing something right."

Mercier also has an advisory role for the power services that BPA provides to its Tribal partners and cus-

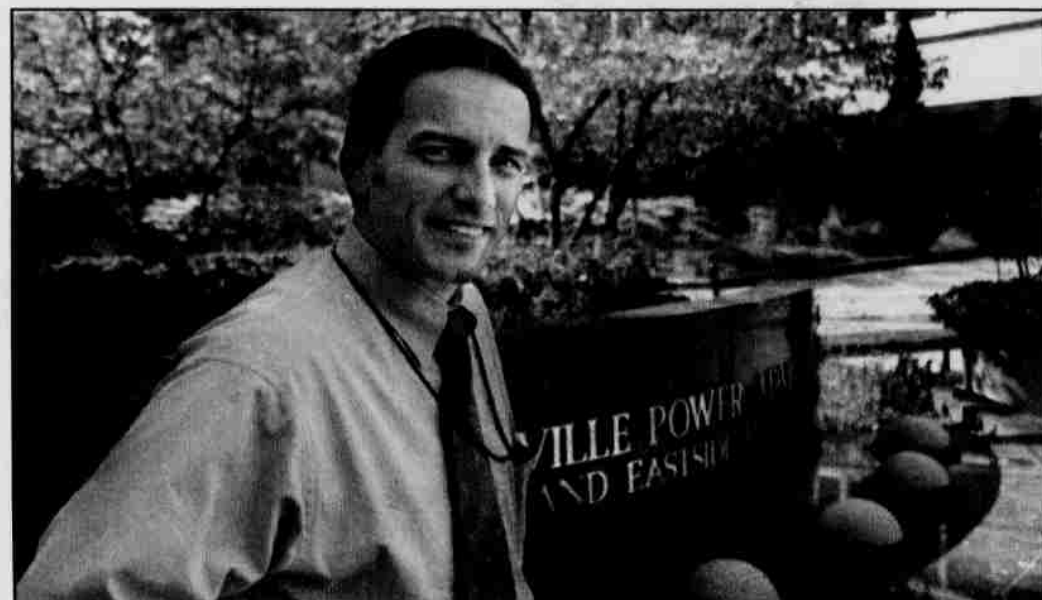


Photo by Ron Karten

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tomers, as when, for example, the Yakama Nation and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians expanded into utility services.

BPA provides technical assistance to any Tribe, or any other utility for that matter, that comes along with a plan to produce power. The agency also has worked aggressively to incorporate renewable energy into the Northwest power grid.

"BPA is very interested in biomass," Mercier said.

Wind and solar energy provide unpredictable surges for the system, but biomass — energy produced by burning material such as wood waste — can be started and stopped as the energy is needed. That is attractive to BPA, because it is in the business of balancing electricity loads between suppliers and users at any given moment.

Biomass also is of interest to Mercier because of the additional benefits it provides to forests, for example. Collecting the biomass improves forest health and reduces

fire hazard. It can be used directly for heating. It potentially could allow a Tribe to get off the electric grid altogether, relying on its own power. And it provides jobs, Mercier said.

Technicians from Tribes continue to pencil out the costs versus benefits, Mercier added, because collecting the biomass and transporting it from forest to power plant adds to the costs.

Bringing biomass into the energy mix is one example of BPA's effort to come up with "the right policy that will be the most beneficial for the public," Mercier said.

Mercier also is involved with training BPA employees about the history of federal Indian policy and the federal government's trust responsibilities. The two-hour training helps BPA employees "understand our obligations to Tribes in the Northwest," he said.

After six years in Washington, D.C., in the office of Sen. Gordon Smith (2003), National Congress of American Indians (2004), U.S. Forest Service (2005-07) and U.S. Treasury (2007-09), Mercier said he returned to Oregon because he was "too far from my people and family. I enjoyed (Washington, D.C.). It was a great place to work. You worked hard and you partied hard, but it wasn't Oregon."

Among his successes in the nation's capital, he names his work at the Community Development Financial Institution Fund at the U.S. Treasury, where he says that despite efforts of the Bush administration to eliminate the \$3 million Native program, "It was funded at \$16 million when I left."

The Native CDFI program provides technical assistance and funding to financial institutions that combat predatory lending in Indian Country. The program creates loan funds in Indian Country to buy a home, start a business or access other financial services at better rates, Mercier said.

He spoke about the Tribal Forest Protection Act to which he contributed while at the Forest Service. This law "allows Tribes to

co-manage resources with the Forest Service," he said.

And he notes his mention in an article "Pedal Power" in the October 2008 issue of Kiplinger's Personal Finance magazine. "Last year," it begins, "Bryan Mercier swapped his four wheels for a mountain bike and is saving thousands on gas and insurance."

The "public service" component kept Mercier in the government when he returned to Oregon with fiancée Christine Begay (Navajo).

"The bottom line with government is the public welfare. I'm here to provide better service to Indians. For me, it's always been about helping agencies better serve Indians," he said.

And, he has long been well-respected in the Northwest Indian community.

"We're thrilled he's at BPA,"

said Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission Public Affairs director Charles Hudson (Hidatsa), who has known Mercier since his work as a Hatfield Fellow in the office of former Sen. Gordon Smith.

"The young man is a very capable political communicator, and that will be the essence of his job at BPA, it would seem to us," Hudson said. "That agency's success with Indian Country is entirely dependent on its ability to communicate with Indian Country. We'd be hard-pressed to think of a person better up to that task than Bryan Mercier."

"He is such a polished and professional young man," said Roy Sampsel, executive director of Portland State University's Institute for Tribal Government. "It is just a pleasure to work with him. Everything he does, he puts his intellect, heart and soul into it, and you can't ask more from a young Indian leader. We're fortunate to have him back."

Mercier has kept busy since returning to Oregon. He's started a political action committee — Grand Ronde for Open and Honest Leadership — to help elect Tribal Council members.

He sits on two volunteer boards — Oregon Native American Business and Entrepreneurial Network, the Tigard-based Native American organization, and the Seattle-based Potlatch Fund, which helps build non-profits in Indian communities.

And he does "a little bit of consulting on economic development issues." He said he is convinced that the road to economic health among Tribes is to keep the politics of Tribal Council out of the running of Tribal government.

"Having worked with different Tribes, there's a clear model of good governance that works," he said. "Look at the Chickasaw Nation and Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. There's a clear separation of politics and governance, which leads to a diversified economy."

Mercier spends personal time hiking in the mountains. He plays soccer and basketball and stays active in Tribal affairs. ■

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