

Rep. says higher education officials should advocate for natural resource development

18 HOURS AGO • [BY CHARLES S. JOHNSON IR STATE BUREAU](#)

Top Montana university system officials must lead the fight to protect the development of natural resources because it's a vital source of state revenue, the chairman of the education appropriations subcommittee told them Tuesday.

The message came from Rep. Roy Hollandsworth, R-Brady, and chairman of the Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Education. He and other panel members shared their thoughts before top U-system officials spoke.

"I guess what I'm saying to the education community is you've got to help us lead the fight to protect the natural resources (development) that's going on," Hollandsworth said. "And I don't want to put you in the line of fire. I just want you to be the voice of reason to show both sides of what goes on."

Hollandsworth noted approvingly that Higher Education Commissioner Clayton Christian, Montana State University President Waded Cruzado and University of Montana President Royce Engstrom all were wearing coal industry lapel pins.

He told the commissioner and presidents: "We need a voice for agriculture. We need a voice for oil in eastern Montana because the press likes to go where the news is, and they like to report anything that anybody's worried about or complains about. So we're trying to get the word about the good things."

Hollandsworth said he thought university system officials were "on board with natural resources" in the 2011 legislative session.

But Hollandsworth said he wasn't pleased to learn about a "Power Shift" conference held at UM in February 2012 where participants learned how to lead grass-roots organizing campaigns about climate change, including organizing ways to obstruct natural resources development. Both Engstrom and Cruzado were listed as sponsors of the conference.

"In a way, it was actually a good thing because it woke me up and a lot of people in the resource community as to what the problem was," he said.

In a later interview, Kevin McRae, associate commissioner of higher education for communications and

human resources, said, “We think perspective and context is important. We’re just reminding legislators that every day, in contrast to the one conference in February, we are proudly teaching students in the Montana university system how to build and operate surface and underground mines.”

As for the coal industry lapel pins, McRae said, “It’s not inconsistent or gimmicky to see university system officials wearing coal pins, given the investment and importance we place on our natural resources development programs.”

Hollandsworth also urged university system officials to stand up for their employees when they come under attack, as UM law professor Kristen Juras did from then Gov. Brian Schweitzer last summer. He didn’t mention Schweitzer’s name.

Juras, hired by Cablevision/Optimum, conducted a study that criticized how the state Revenue Department values centrally assessed property. She presented the study at the Revenue and Transportation Interim Committee, which Hollandsworth chaired.

Schweitzer called Engstrom in August to complain about her study and said he asked the UM president “if it was the policy of the University of Montana to shift \$100 million in taxes from a dozen out-of-state corporations to 45,000 Montana businesses and 350,000 homes.”

Engstrom apologized to Schweitzer and said Juras had “apparently” violated some aspects of UM policy. Her written study lacked a disclaimer saying the conclusions were hers and not the UM’s, although she made that clear in her oral presentation. Engstrom said Juras didn’t seek prior consent from the law school dean to use the UM name in working as a consultant.

“We came to her rescue and wrote letters and said, ‘We will back you,’” Hollandsworth told the U-system officials. “And I felt you guys did a pretty good job, but I will say from now on, if that happens, stand up, ask us to back you guys. Don’t let your help get thrown under the bus, and she felt like she was.”