AMES and Energy Keepers Inc.

Allen: Welcome to the Mansfield Global Leadership Podcast. I’m Allen Sangster. Today we continue our preparations for the Asia Montana Energy Summit which will take place on April 29th and 30th by continuing to interview leaders, speakers, and honored guests of the event. Today’s guest is Brian Lipscomb, CEO of Energy Keepers Inc. Why don’t you tell us a little bit about yourself and your organization?

Brian: My name is Brian Lipscomb. I’m the CEO of Energy Keepers Inc. which is a corporation fully owned by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and it was established to acquire Kerr Dam and operate it into the future and market power from it. So I started out, I’m a tribal member from here first of all born and raised on the reservation, got a degree in civil engineering early on in life, used that for a while working on the Lolo National Forest as an engineer, for nearly ten years. I then had an opportunity to come back to work for the tribe as the fish and wildlife manager, took that opportunity in 1992 and spent a little over ten years doing that job. The primary part of it was working on Kerr Dam. Establishing the mitigation measures, how it damages the fish and wildlife, and then began to implement some of those over the course of the following three years as the Director of the Tribal Land Department. Wanted to get back close to working on the hydropower system, so in 2005 I took a job in Portland Oregon and my wife and I moved to Portland. I was the Director of a non-profit organization called the Columbia Basin Fish and Wildlife Society which coordinated the mitigation for the entire Columbia River hydropower system. So I spent five years traveling around the entire Columbia Basin, helping to coordinate mitigation for the damages caused by the federal hydropower system, along with all of the tribes in the basin, the four state agencies, and a couple of federal agencies as well mixed in with that.

Then in 2010 when the tribes got really serious about planning for the acquisition of Kerr Dam, they created the Department of Energy, hired me as the Director of that department, brought me back home and I took over that. Those duties then in 2010, primary task of course was planning for the acquisition of the Kerr and a major part of that was the strategic planning and development of Energy Keepers, which took us two about years to get that done. At which time I was appointed as the CEO and have been since November 2012 when the corporation was established.

Allen: Energy Keepers has kind of an interesting logo. Would you mind explaining the symbolism behind the logo?

Brian: No, absolutely. The name of our corporation itself, the name and the logo all have significant meaning for us. But to understand the context, it’s important to understand the context of Kerr Dam as a project for the tribes. Whenever we talk about Kerr it’s important to know that it is constructed on a very significant cultural and natural resource site for the tribes. It’s always important to keep that in mind. It was used historically and is still used today for those purposes. So as we start to embark on the acquisition of this asset, it is really a reacquisition, if you will, of resources that were lost to us at a time when the federal government was really trying to assimilate the tribe and was taking a lot of resources away from the tribe. Through allotment, through construction of the irrigation project, and ultimately
the construction of Kerr Dam, they all kind of occurred at the same time. In the 1920s through, well Kerr was constructed in 1930 to 1939 it first started producing electricity. So it’s important to note that significance.

Then as we talk about the name of Energy Keepers Inc. which is just a DBA but we do business as Energy Keepers Inc. It’s the nearest thing that translates well for our Salish and Kootenai name which in Salish is SXʷNQ̓EʔELS L SUWEȽM and in Kootenai is KSUKLIŁMUMAL ʾA-ḴALMKWAL’ITS. Both of those in, those languages, means the keepers of energy, or those who care for the energy. So the first word being those who care for both in Salish and Kootenai, then SUWEȽM in Salish is the word for lightning and ʾA-ḴALMKWA in Kootenai is the word for light from thunder of lightning as well. So a lot of meaning to that name for us. So as we contemplated our logo and thought about how we’re restoring the facility and the place back to the tribes, it relates back to stories in our tribal culture about creation and about Coyote, about how he’s always getting in trouble and getting himself killed and the fox jumps over him and brings him back to life. Our logo is the fox jumping over Kerr Dam or the location of Kerr Dam and bringing it back to life for the people. That’s kind of a quick rendition of it. Again, very meaningful for us from that perspective and a lot of thought has gone in to not only the project itself but into the naming and branding of our corporation.

Allen: It looks like on your website you have a countdown to the acquisition date. So it will be acquired by your organization or by the CSKT tribes and then from there what are your plans for the future? What are you going to be doing with the electricity that comes out of the dam and how will that be distributed? Are there going to be any noticeable differences for the typical Montanan in terms of, you know, the electricity bill or any sort of things that will touch on their daily life?

Brian: Yeah, so, as you said, we’ll acquire Kerr Dam pursuant to elements of negotiation that were put in place in 1985 in the current license for the facility, so we’ll acquire take over operation on that date. Our intention is to take the electricity to the wholesale market. It is in fact where electricity from Kerr has flowed during PTL Montana’s ownership. So from December of 1999 until November of this past year 2014 when North Western Energy acquired it, all of the energy from Kerr has gone out to the wholesale market and we’ll continue to do that as well. What that means is it gets sold out to those who are connected directly to the transmission grid. You and I as customers or utility customers, we’re in the retail market so typically won’t see that impact from Kerr’s marketing in the wholesale market, whatever the market price bears, if the utilities that we are acquiring where we get our electricity from as customers acquires from that wholesale market. Typically though in Western Montana, not a lot of the utilities acquire from the wholesale market, for example in the Mission Valley, we get our power from Mission Valley Power, which is the local utility operated by the tribe. 90% of that electricity comes from the Bonneville Power Administration. In Missoula, for example, you’re customers of North Western Energy, so the power at this point now is generated by North Western Energy and provided directly toward U.S. retail customers. So no, it will not impact the price that we pay for power, so from that perspective we will see no change. As I said, our intentions are to operate it as an independent power producer, or a wholesale power producer, into the future.
I think it’s also important to note that there’ll be no change to the operation as we take over Kerr Dam. Really the operational requirements for the facility are embedded within the federal energy regulatory commission license. Many of those operational constraints were actually put in on the behest of the tribe. They cover flood control as well as recreational, and refill of the lake. So, from those perspectives we completely intend to comply with the license. If there’s any contemplation of adjusting those in the future it will be the same public process that put them in place in the first place. So initially no changes and none expected as we head out of the block either. So we’ll see the same operation on the lower river and the same operation at Flathead Lake.

**Allen:** Beyond the acquisition of the Kerr Dam, are there other plans for this organization in terms of expansion or growth beyond the next year and sort of getting your feet on the ground with the Kerr Dam?

**Brian:** Initially no, initially our structure only affords this opportunity to acquire and operate Kerr Dam. Anything beyond that that we would contemplate as a company would need to be approved by the shareholders or the tribal council in this case; they act as the shareholder’s representative. So because we are a corporation that will continue to provide the land rental payment to the tribes which is a primary, stable, predictable source of revenue for the tribal government, the ability for the corporation to grow or make expenditures or develop beyond Kerr is really a point of control if you will by the Tribal Government in their ownership over the corporation to make sure that that predictability and reliability of that stream of income that the government depends on isn’t interrupted unnecessarily. We’ll be doing Kerr right out of the box, but that’s not to say there aren’t other opportunities or energy or electricity development on the reservation that we’ve taken a look at. We’ve done feasibility assessments on wind, solar, small hydro, and secondary assessments on biomass as well that we’ve just completed. So as opportunities arise, markets will bear further energy development that is in alignment with the tribal values, we may consider that in the future, but in the moment it’s Kerr Dam.

**Allen:** Now of course, you will be participating in the Asia Montana Energy Summit which will take place on the 29th-30th. As part of that Summit, the University of Montana will be hosting representatives from a number of different countries including Japan, China, Canada, and of course from our own state and national government. So obviously to Montana your organization represents a culturally significant and important part of who we are. Is there a unique message or take away that you feel that your organization can offer those that are coming from other countries?

**Brian:** Overall a couple of things, of course we’re native, indigenous people managing our own resources and really doing it in a way that we have aspirations will sustain it into the future, not only economically but culturally. In a way that is least impactive to the overall environment and the world that we live in. I think a good message is that don’t overlook your indigenous peoples and their input into energy development, and including them in the long-term operation of those energy resources and providing of those energy resources into the future. I think another message that hopefully coming across is that with proper planning and dedication over a long term, some great things and big things can happen successfully. I think this is a successful project that has been a long time in the making, and us as a tribe being dedicated to it and now getting ready to implement that project really speaks to the fortitude of
our tribal leadership that make good decisions and then stick with those decisions over the long term, because often times in especially in today’s world, people expects things immediately and sometimes it’s better to have a long-term view.

Allen: For more information about this and other Mansfield Center programs please visit our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield. The Mansfield center podcast is produced by myself and Abraham Kim with help from Matthew Olson. Our theme music was composed by Ryan Dufresh. We’d love to know what you think. Please rate us on iTunes and help others discover the show. I’m Allen Sangster. Thank you for listening.