

# Emails show Spear wanted to delay Big Sky announcement

Documents turned over to Tribune show AD was concerned about timing of move; WAC commissioner gauges UI's interest in FBS league

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## Theo Lawson/Lewiston Tribune

MOSCOW - In late April, the University of Idaho made a landmark NCAA decision, dropping its football program from the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) to the lower-tier Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) and effectively ending a 22-year run at the highest level of college football.

UI president Chuck Staben formally announced the school's intention to join the Big Sky Conference in a news conference on April 28, more than a month after the Sun Belt Conference chose not to re-up with the Vandals.

The move was controversial. It was met with resistance. Many vehemently disagreed with Staben's vision. Others thought the president acted rashly in making a decision just 58 days after the Sun Belt showed UI the door - that he moved too swiftly without truly combing through the options, or allowing others to materialize.

The Big Sky gave Idaho until May 3 to accept an invitation, but it was widely thought to be more of a soft deadline than an ultimatum, and the league would grant an extension if requested.

Idaho's top athletic administrator was among those who believed the university's best move, for the time being, was to not make a move at all.

According to public records obtained by the Tribune, athletic director Rob Spear drafted an email seven days prior to the Big Sky announcement, listing three reasons that would merit delaying such a decision.

"President Staben, The more I reflect on this decision, the more I think it is important that you delay the Big Sky decision for the following reasons," Spear wrote in an email addressed to himself. "1. We have a number of spring sport championships that will be completely over shadowed with an announcement in May. This would be unfortunate for those student-athletes. 2. Football has endured an investigation and getting removed from the Sun Belt. I don't think it is fair for the student-athletes and coaches to endure another setback. There are a lot of positives heading into next season. 3. An announcement now will tremendously impact fundraising."

The university charged the Tribune \$911.14 to furnish the public records, which included 645 email communications sent by, and received by, both Staben and Spear. On May 3, university general counsel responded to an initial email sent by the Tribune, affirming the UI was in receipt of the records request. General counsel began collecting the emails on May 19, but didn't make them available until Aug. 29. According to Idaho law, public records requests must be granted or denied within 10 working days of the request.

Spear, who flanked Staben and sported an unenthused look during points of the April 28 news conference, hasn't backpedaled from his original stance.

"At the time I thought a delayed announcement was important to allow us to focus on season ticket sales and fiscal year-end fundraising," Spear told the Tribune late last week. Idaho's AD also anticipated additional shifting within college football, but noted, "That movement appears to be happening with the Big 12 but it is unlikely that it will trickle far enough down to benefit the University of Idaho."

The Big Sky decision still looms large in Moscow.

According to Spear, the school's fundraising and season ticket sales have both taken hits. A number of the emails obtained by the Tribune came from displeased donors threatening to pull their financial support to the football program.

Between Jan. 1 and May 1, 132 individuals wrote letters to Spear and Staben expressing their opinion. Of those, 45 agreed with the move, while another 87 opposed it.

The Vandals will play the remainder of this season, and the next one, in the Sun Belt before dropping down in 2018. Another casualty of the move is the number of scholarships the UI will have to cut. FCS schools are only allowed 63 scholarships, as opposed to the 85 Idaho can currently hand out as an FBS institution. The Vandals have already taken measures to assure that they'll be NCAA compliant in two years.

In mid-February, Idaho made its case to remain a Sun Belt member, but emails suggest that Staben was preparing for the Big Sky move well before he presented to the SBC's chancellors and presidents on Feb. 15.

In a Jan. 5 message addressed to Spear, Staben wrote: "I feel more strongly that we need to plan to move to Big Sky."

When the SBC declined an option to renew Idaho's lease, the school mulled its options: remain an FBS member by declaring independence, or make an unprecedented move and become the first program to drop down.

The Vandals were Big Sky members for 30 years, from 1965-95, before leaving for the FBS and Big West Conference in 1996.

Spear began to compile, but never finalized, an independent schedule for the 2018 football season.

"While an independent schedule was doable, the schedule would have been extremely challenging," Spear said last week.

The email records also reveal an interesting conversation between Spear and Western Athletic Conference commissioner Jeff Hurd, where Hurd broaches the possibility of reviving the WAC as a football league.

"Rob: Have you had an opportunity to speak with your President regarding football and whether or not he believes the idea of other Big Sky institutions moving to the FBS level could have any legs?" Hurd wrote. "Although (former Big Sky commissioner) Doug Fullerton had interest, one of my concerns is that the new Commissioner might consider it too much of a risk to have on his/her plate right shortly after being hired."

Spear replied: "Jeff, do you have time for a call? I don't want to respond via email...FOIA."

The AD warned about Freedom of Information Act requests in one other email, addressed to Staben.

However, in an email reply addressed to another recipient, Spear wrote: "It may be time to get the WAC to take 6 football schools and form an FBS league. It would certainly save the WAC!"

In another message, he said: "The WAC has traction and I look forward to influencing the Big Sky from within. I know I can convince Montana and Montana State to jump...we need to lock arms with them. And a bowl win changes everything! I know our kids will be motivated!"

Last week, Spear clarified that the WAC would need eight members to become an FBS league and six to become an FCS league.

Although the WAC has expressed interest in reviving football - it originally disbanded in 2012 - other FBS conferences may not find the idea so appealing.

"While the NCAA rules still recognize the WAC as an FBS league, I am not so sure how excited the current FBS conferences are about adding another league and dividing the money with another conference," Spear said last week. He added: "Whatever Idaho does in the future I think it is important that we align with Montana and Montana State."

Spear, who'd always been a staunch advocate of UI retaining its FBS tag, said the UI lacked the private funding to remain "financially competitive" as a member of college football's top tier.

"We would have to invest \$5 to \$6 million annually into the football program," Spear said. "This funding was not being provided through private donations and was not going to come at the expense of academic programs."

In multiple emails, however, Spear advises that the decision wasn't his to make. He constantly fed input to Staben, but the ball was in the president's court.

"Ultimately, President Staben made the decision to move to the FCS," Spear said.

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*Lawson may be contacted at [tlawson@lmtribune.com](mailto:tlawson@lmtribune.com) or (208) 848-2260. Follow him on Twitter @TheoLawson\_Trib.*