

Rivals race through key states looking to sway undecided

By MIKE GLOVER
Associated Press Writer
ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP)—The Democratic presidential contenders are targeting key states and swing voters in the closing hours before the biggest campaign test of the season, with front-running John Kerry pledging “a real conversation with America.”

Seven states and 269 pledged delegates are in the mix Tuesday and the rivals raced from stop to stop across the country. Kerry targeted all seven, while some candidates looked for targets of opportunity.

Kerry continued to collect big-name endorsements.

Howard Dean, the former front-runner, continued to pound Kerry for his financial ties with special interests, saying those links cast doubt on the Massachusetts senator’s claim to be the champion of the battle against those interests.

“He misrepresented himself, grossly misrepresented himself, as a candidate who would take on special interests in Washington,” the former Vermont governor said.

“My record responds to that,” Kerry replied to reporters during a stop in Fargo, N.D. “I have fought powerful special interests every step of the way.”

Meanwhile, Kerry was continuing to pick up big-name endorsements, winning the backing of the United Farm Workers union and Washington Gov. Gary Locke. Aides said the union’s backing would give Kerry crucial support among Hispanics who are a key constituency in New Mexico and Arizona, both selecting delegates Tuesday.

Washington state holds caucuses Saturday, and Kerry plans to head there and await returns Tuesday night, shifting his focus to the next test.

Retired Gen. Wesley Clark focused on Oklahoma, where polls show he has the best shot at pulling off a badly needed win Tuesday night. He was joined by Mike McClintic, who as a 22-year-old private pulled Clark out of gunfire and protected him during a Vietnam

firefight. “Mike, you saved my life,” Clark said, shaking his hand at an Oklahoma rally.

Kerry held a similar reunion with Jim Rassmann, a Special Forces officer Kerry rescued in Vietnam.

North Carolina Sen. John Edwards was focused on South Carolina, where polls gave him the best chance of scoring a victory. He dismissed suggestions he could join Kerry as a running mate.

“I think you should ask Senator Kerry whether he’s interested in being vice president,” said Edwards.

“You can see I’ve been talking too much,” he added.

Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman touted the endorsements of newspapers in Seattle and South Carolina. “What this says is I have national support,” he said.

Kerry spent Sunday in North Dakota, fulfilling his pledge to campaign in all seven states holding tests on Tuesday: Arizona, New Mexico, North Dakota, Delaware, Missouri, South Carolina and Oklahoma. Together they represent more than 12 percent of the 2,162 delegates needed to claim the Democratic nomination.

Kerry holds comfortable leads in polls in five of the states, and is competitive in the other two — Oklahoma and South Carolina. His hope is a big win Tuesday night that likely would narrow the field.

Kerry’s focus Monday was on New Mexico and Arizona, completing a one-week blitz of the seven states currently in play.

Polls show him well ahead in both states, but surveys around the country detect a huge group of undecided voters, clearly large enough to sway the outcome.

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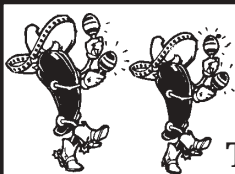
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