

Gene Smith Says UCLA, USC Additions Were Not In Response To SEC



In an ever-changing college football landscape, consolidation of power has taken priority. This started last offseason with the bombshell announcement that Oklahoma and Texas would secede from the conference they had called home since 1996, opting to join the greener pastures of the SEC.

The latest step in a further round of realignment and expansion comes from the West Coast, where UCLA and USC began talks to join the Big Ten in recent weeks. Those talks developed rapidly, resulting in the schools applying for admittance Thursday morning and a vote taking place later that evening to unanimously approve the new additions to the Big Ten.

Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith – as well as Ohio State University president Kristina M. Johnson – spoke on Friday, just a mere hours after UCLA and USC were admitted to the Big Ten beginning in 2024, and Smith said the move was only focused on what was best for the conference.

“We weren’t doing it in response to the SEC,” he said. “We were doing it for our needs. Obviously we’re in a situation now where (Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren) has done a marvelous job in facilitating discussions with our television partners. So, this helps move the needle in that regard. So, it had nothing to do with Texas and Oklahoma or us setting up mega conferences for the future. It was about what did the Big Ten need and our marketing and media rights opportunities along with the great relationship that we have two institutions that culturally fit us was just too good to pass up.

“It was more about those things than it was about trying to compare to the SEC,” he continued. “Moving forward, it certainly sets us up for the future with the College Football Playoff and whatever emerges in that landscape. Those outcomes are real, (and) certainly it aligns us more with the SEC. That’s an outcome but that wasn’t a driving force.”

While Smith likely minced words about the impact of the SEC on the Big Ten’s aggressive expansion out west – which, Smith said, was instigated by UCLA and USC – the move has significant ramifications for the Big Ten, Pac-12 and the rest of college football as conferences continue to grow.

He reiterated, though, that the first thing taken into consideration was how it would impact student-athletes at Ohio State and the other Big Ten programs.

“At the end of the day, we needed to look at what’s best for our 14 schools and the student-athletes we serve and our institutions,” he said. “This was part of that decision process.”

And as for The Alliance - a handshake agreement between the ACC, Big Ten and Pac-12 that amounted to no more than a handful of press releases - Smith insisted that it is still going even after the Big Ten raided the Pac-12 for two of the conference's premier schools.

"The Alliance still exists because we still have cooperative relationships around certain things that we do, but it certainly impacted it," Smith said. "I can't speak to the trust yet. The fallout from this move is still fresh and so what happens between now and the end of next week, and the end of July, will help determine that. But at this point in time, it's hard for me to project that trust issue."