

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Land exchange refloated in House

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WASHINGTON -- Utah officials are pitching an 88,000-acre land swap that would protect popular recreation destinations along the Colorado River, world-renowned mountain bike trails, and soaring redrock arches in sensitive wilderness areas while helping fund Utah schools. "It's quite unique," said Rep. Chris **Cannon**, R-Utah, who is sponsoring the exchange in the U.S. House. "We've got a lot of support on it. We hope it will go very smoothly and we'll get it done very quickly."

It is the first exchange proposed since Utah's bid to swap out land in the San Rafael Swell collapsed in 2002 after whistle-blowers at the Bureau of Land Management alleged it was a \$100 million boondoggle for federal taxpayers.

The proposal would grant the Interior Department areas that include the Kokopelli and Slickrock bike trails, renowned for their scenery and terrain; parts of Westwater Canyon, a popular white-water rafting route; and sweeping arches and potential wilderness areas near Arches National Park and Dinosaur National Monument.

"It will create a very large tract of open space near the Colorado River that will be protected from being fragmented by development," said Laura Kamala of The Grand Canyon Trust, a conservation group.

Utah would get land in the Uinta Basin believed to contain valuable oil deposits. Oil royalties could generate considerable revenue earmarked for the state's schools. The state also would get parcels near the town of Green River and the Moab airport.

Pete Downing, legislative director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, said the group backs protecting the sensitive areas addressed in the bill.

"If this bill shows anything, it certainly shows that reasonable people can come together and agree on the benefits of protecting our natural wonders and redrock country and those areas that are proposed for wilderness," he said.

The Colorado River land swap was proposed last year by Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, and Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, although Congress adjourned before considering it. **Cannon** quietly re-introduced the bill last week. Bennett will introduce a version shortly.

Since statehood, Utah has had school-trust lands scattered across the state. But many are surrounded by federal lands and can't be developed. In some cases, the state has worked out exchanges to consolidate the lands into a developable block.

That ended in 2002, after the failed San Rafael Swell swap. Then-Gov. Mike Leavitt proposed the trade to facilitate a national monument in the swell, but it crumbled after BLM appraisers said the federal government was giving up as much as \$117 million more than it was getting in the deal.

The Interior Department's inspector general investigated and said the process was inappropriate and influenced by political pressure. The department's appraisal practices were revamped.

But the new Utah proposal departs from the revised appraisal rules by requiring appraisers to consider the conservation value of the land. Conservation groups often pay more than those leasing it for drilling or grazing.

Christopher Krupp, an attorney with the Western Land Exchange Project, said that could inflate the appraised value of the federal land.

"That's a serious issue," he said. "The change in structure that was created after the San Rafael problem isn't going to be used in a bill that follows the San Rafael swap. That doesn't make much sense to me."