

Deseret News, Wednesday, August 21, 2002

## **Whistle-blower says Cannon trying to punish him**

By Lee Davidson  
Deseret News Washington correspondent

WASHINGTON — A federal appraiser has filed a whistle-blower complaint alleging that Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, was trying to punish him and others who say a land swap in the San Rafael Swell could give Utah an unfair \$100 million windfall.

Kent Wilkinson, a Utah-based appraiser for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, filed papers with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel alleging gross mismanagement by BLM officials on the deal. Cannon is pushing a bill in Congress to implement it.

Utah officials and the Bush administration agreed in principle this year to swap 108,000 of Utah school trust land in the Swell for 135,000 of federal land elsewhere. It would eliminate islands of school trust lands in wilderness-like federal areas and give the state lands more suitable to development (including mining) to fund schools.

Both sides said the lands exchanged would be of roughly equal value. They based that determination not on formal appraisals but on a process seeking in part to recognize the value of protecting scenic land and of consolidating holdings to make management easier.

But Wilkinson and other BLM appraisers pointed out what they said were many errors in a paper that outlined the government's reasoning. Among the errors they reported: a claim that some coal-rich federal land had no minerals. Critics cited numerous instances where the paper tilted the deal in Utah's favor — giving it an unfair windfall they estimated between \$96.7 million and \$116 million.

Appraisers raised their concerns to Utah media. When environmental groups sent copies of resulting stories to the House Resources Committee, Democrats demanded that passage of Cannon's bill be delayed to look into the accusations. Cannon then pulled it temporarily.

But at a committee meeting, Cannon loudly said that accusations by BLM appraisers were groundless; that they were disobeying instructions of leaders; they had made "political threats" against him; and they should be disciplined.

After the meeting, when the Deseret News asked Cannon exactly what "threats" had been made, an aide responded that a different BLM appraiser had called and said he would make appraisal data public if Cannon continued to push the trade.

Wilkinson told the Deseret News, "Mr. Cannon's comments have had a chilling effect on the willingness of people in the BLM to come forward. They work for a living and worry about their jobs. . . . But they have a right and an obligation to report waste and fraud."

Wilkinson said some officials have called in him and other appraisers to question their loyalty to the agency. They also sought to stop further release of documentation that raises questions about the land trade.

He said he filed his complaint, "First, to protect myself. . . . I also want to get all of the issues out there in one big package." His complaint includes — and makes public — copies of documents he said some leaders tried to suppress evidence of what appraisers say are problems with the trade.

Wilkinson filed the complaint with the assistance of the advocacy group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

Its general counsel, Dan Meyer, said, "This is one of the most one-sided land deals since the purchase of Manhattan Island."

Meyer added, "While President Bush is calling for corporate accountability, his appointees at Interior have engineered a deal that is so bad it would make Enron blush," Meyer said in a press release.

PEER says that if the Office of Special Counsel finds the whistle-blower allegations have merit, it will order an investigation — and that could also help block approval in Congress for the trade this session.

Janine Blaeloch, director of the Western Land Exchange Project, said documents Wilkinson has provided shows that "the negotiators of this deal not only betrayed the public but lied to Congress about its equity."

Adding to the difficulty of passing the land trade in Congress is that it is now national news. The Washington Post ran a front-page story on it this week, arising in part from Wilkinson's filing, which had the headline, "U.S. Ignored Appraisers in Land Deal With Utah, BLM Experts Called Swap a \$100 Million Giveaway."