

Editorial: Land exchange / A troubling example from Utah

Published Aug 22, 2002

Minneapolis Star Tribune

Done right, public-land exchanges are a potent tool for preserving wild and scenic areas at reasonable cost. But as the furor over a proposed swap in Utah demonstrates anew, the work too often is done wrong.

The driving force behind the Utah deal is Gov. Mike Leavitt and his proposal for a new national monument in a lovely stretch of red-rock country called the San Rafael Swell. Western governors don't often make such proposals, and this one has the welcome support of President Bush.

The monument area includes state-owned parcels totaling some 108,000 acres. Utah proposes to give these up, greatly lowering the chance that a mining operation or motel village will crop up in the middle of the backcountry.

In return, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management proposes to give Utah scattered tracts of federal land totaling 135,000 acres. The BLM valued the land on each side at about \$35 million, which made the trade look fair.

Then, as legislation to close the deal was making its way through Congress, some of the BLM's Utah officials blew a very loud whistle. Their agency's appraisals of federal acreage, they said, understated its value by as much as \$117 million.

Valuations in land exchanges are often controversial and always difficult. Open land is harder to appraise than, say, a suburban shopping-mall site. Setting a fair value for recreation land is harder still, and balancing its worth against land to be logged or mined is a matter of philosophy as much as economics.

But the problems with the Utah appraisals are especially troubling. The whistleblowers claim that the federal parcels were undervalued deliberately, based on appraisals that ignored significant mining potential.

The credibility of their claims is supported by extensive documentation -- and also by the efforts of higher BLM officials to suppress the complaints. Rep. Chris Cannon, a Utah Republican who is pushing for the monument designation, has worsened matters by suggesting that the critics be "slapped hard" for their disclosures.

Congress needs to look closely at the whistleblowers' case in considering Cannon's bill. A national monument in the San Rafael Swell is worth a high price, but it must be a fair one. Approving an unjustified giveaway to Utah will only hurt the credibility of all federal-state land exchanges.

That credibility, it must be noted, is already tattered. Just two years ago the General Accounting Office assembled a long list of land-exchange outrages by the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service, some of them more eye-popping than the Utah proposal.

Nothing much has been done since then to reform the agencies' practices -- a task that Congress ought to take up promptly. Exchanges based on fair property valuations, and open to scrutiny before the deal is done, can do a lot of good for public lands. Exchanges of the other kind, which the Utah swap appears to exemplify, can only cause harm.

