

Editorial:

Cannon Fodder

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Note to Rep. Chris Cannon: Back off.

Incensed that a federal Bureau of Land Management appraiser claimed knowledge of "gross mismanagement" within the agency concerning the proposed San Rafael land swap, the Third District congressman branded the appraiser "insubordinate." Cannon also barked, "I want to make sure they (federal employees) get slapped hard, because they're acting inappropriately."

The Salt Lake-based appraiser, Kent Wilkinson, was so shaken by the congressman's attack, he sought whistle-blower protection in the federal Office of Special Counsel. Wilkinson's exposure to retribution is especially acute because not only does he have a congressman on his case, he's got to worry about his BLM superiors who'd sacrifice one of their own to curry favor in congressional corridors.

Is that possible, you ask?

Already the BLM's chief negotiator said a list of concerns about the swap compiled by subordinates was intended only for "internal discussion" and doesn't constitute a finding of facts. Looks like a muzzle being clamped on.

Congressmen who want federal employees "slapped hard" for revealing alleged mismanagement might reconsider their remarks because federal law bars retribution against those who expose government impropriety. This is a hard-won piece of federal legislation achieved on the ruined careers of many courageous employees.

Why was Cannon so upset? Because he and other representatives are maintaining, against evidence to the contrary, that the federal-state land swap proposal is a fair deal; about \$35 million, give or take, each way.

But BLM appraisers, led by Wilkinson, disagree.

As a preliminary step to preserving the 1-million acre San Rafael Swell as a national monument, the state would deed 108,000 acres of state land in the Swell in exchange for 135,000 acres of federal land outside it. Negotiators call the swap even. However, critics say the federal government could be the loser by nearly \$100 million.

Why? Mineral values on the federal land include an estimated \$44 million to \$64 million in oil shale deposits.

This is where Wilkinson ended up in Cannon's sights. Wilkinson, attacked for doing the job he is paid to do, filed a "disclosure" with the Office of Special Counsel spelling out his knowledge of alleged "gross mismanagement" within the BLM on the land swap deal.

If the deal stinks, it shouldn't go forward, even if, as Cannon says, there are enough votes to push the swap bill through Congress next month. Key Democrats are concerned about the fairness of it all. Taxpayers should be equally concerned.

Cannon's remarks were inappropriate. Intimidation and retribution are absolutely unacceptable; that's not what public office is about. Instead of throwing his weight around, Cannon should be thankful that a federal employee cares so much to protect the interests of the taxpayers.

Wilkinson also could be saving Cannon from the profound embarrassment of backing a bad deal.

If there's any slapping to be done, it should be one that brings Cannon to his senses.