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Administration Cancels Swap of Federal Land With Utah

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Thursday, July 24, 2003; Page A02

The Bush administration is abandoning a controversial land swap with the state of Utah after the Interior Department's inspector general confirmed complaints by the government's own experts that the deal amounted to a multimillion-dollar giveaway by U.S. taxpayers.

Utah Gov. Michael O. Leavitt and officials with Interior and the Department of Agriculture agreed to terminate the agreement in letters signed and made public yesterday.

"Although some aspects of this land exchange proposal still have merit, because doubt and uncertainty would cloud future consideration of it, we no longer believe that pursuit of this exchange would be in the best interest of the federal or state government or the public,"

wrote Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton in a letter to Rep. Chris Cannon (R-Utah), a the House Resources Committee who favored the deal.

The deal, under a pact signed in 2002, would have exchanged 135,000 acres of federal land for 108,000 acres of state parcels. Utah would have gotten commercially attractive land to pump tax revenue into its school system. The federal government was to get scenic river bluffs for a possible monument as well as prime habitat for the threatened desert tortoise.

But at least six officials at the federal Bureau of Land Management complained the swap offered a \$100 million windfall to the state. They said several parcels of mineral-rich federal land had been counted as having little or no mineral value.

BLM negotiators and their bosses at Interior valued the state and federal lands at about \$100 million each. But the BLM's Utah office said the federal land was worth \$97 million more.

In a report released yesterday, the IG found that Interior officials "negotiated away a significant interest in the potentially very valuable oil shale resource" of part of the land. They also found that Interior valued part of the land "in a manner consistent with the valuation of certain other federal lands."

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properties," the IG said. And officials "inappropriately used a consulting report to suit that properties to be exchanged were of approximately equal value," according to the

The IG also found that top Interior officials concealed results of the negotiations from decision-makers and Congress. And the IG said the probe raised concerns about whether Kathleen Clarke, the director of the BLM, had properly recused herself in the matter. an aide to Leavitt and to former representative James V. Hansen (R-Utah), who favor

"A separate investigation has been opened to address the issues attendant to Clarke's this exchange," the IG report said. Interior officials have said Clarke has recused herself on Utah issues.

The IG began the probe into the deal based on information provided by Kent Wilkins, a BLM appraiser who gave documents to The Washington Post last August.

"They're cooking the books, and it's all to the detriment of the public," Wilkinson told last year.

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