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## New orders guiding federal land exchanges

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WASHINGTON - Interior Department Secretary Gale Norton has issued new orders guiding federal land exchanges that would prevent a repeat of Utah's errant San Rafael land swap and could affect another Utah exchange being negotiated.

The guidelines will keep Interior Department negotiators from unilaterally stretching the national appraisal rules to try to take into account scenic value, endangered species habitat or public policy objectives.

When those hard-to-measure values need to be addressed, negotiators can depart from the appraisal rules, but they must notify Congress and the Interior Department's inspector general and clearly explain the valuation method, Norton wrote.

Norton's guidance is the latest fallout from Utah's failed San Rafael land swap in 2002 that was meant to clear the way for a national monument in the San Rafael Swell - but was scuttled when Bureau of Land Management whistle-blowers claimed Utah would get land potentially worth \$117 million more than it was giving up.

The Interior Department's inspector general confirmed it was a lopsided deal and that department employees tried to hide the true cost from Congress.

Norton responded by ordering a reorganization of the department's land appraisal process.

"During the past year, the department has taken significant steps to ensure that land transactions are conducted with integrity and earn public confidence," Norton wrote. The policy directives, issued late last week, were the final piece of that reform effort.

"At least on the surface it seems they've done what they should have done in response to San Rafael," said Janine Blaeloch of the Western Land Exchange Project, which monitors federal land swaps. The directive sends a message that "If you're going to fool around with the appraisal process, let us know you're fooling with the appraisal process."

Utah is currently trying to work out a new land exchange, giving the federal government scenic land along the Colorado River in exchange for areas in the Uinta Basin with oil and gas potential and a parcel near Moab that could be developed into a lodge for tourists.

Sen. Bob Bennett and Rep. Jim Matheson introduced legislation last year to seek congressional approval for the land exchange.

Blaeloch said the new Utah deal will be "the perfect test case" for the department's reform efforts.