

Testimony of
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Land and Minerals Management
Department of the Interior
House Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Parks, Recreation and Public Lands on
H.R. 4968, The Federal-Utah State Trust Lands Consolidation Act
June 27, 2002

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Department of the Interior in strong support of H.R. 4968, the Federal-Utah State Trust Lands Consolidation Act. This legislation would ratify the agreement recently signed by the Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture with Governor Michael O. Leavitt of Utah. The agreement proposes to exchange approximately 108,284 acres of land currently administered by the Utah School and Institutional Trust Land Administration (SITLA) for approximately 133,283 acres of federal lands. A set of the deferred land purchases by the Federal government of SITLA lands in Washington County, Utah will add additional protection over time for sensitive and threatened resources in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve.

The agreement, which we urge the Congress to ratify swiftly, serves important needs of both the Federal government in its land managing capacity, and of SITLA. SITLA has management responsibility for 3.5 million acres within the State of Utah, and is mandated to manage those lands for the benefit of its trustees, primarily the schoolchildren of Utah. This legislation follows in the footsteps of the "Utah Schools and Lands Exchange Act of 1998" (P.L. 105-335) and the "Utah West Desert Land Exchange Act of 2000" (P.L. 106-301) which have benefitted the Federal government through acquisition of environmentally significant lands and have benefitted the people of Utah through long-term revenue potential.

The Agreement

The Department signed the "2002 Federal-Utah State Trust Lands Consolidation" agreement on June 20, 2002. Let me briefly describe the major components of that agreement.

Lands to be Conveyed to the Federal Government

Under the agreement, the Federal government would receive 108,284 acres of land from SITLA. The largest portion of these lands, approximately 102,871 acres in the San Rafael Swell area of central Utah, would be administered by the BLM. The San Rafael Swell area is an exquisite landscape of high mesas, deep canyons, spectacular arches and soaring spires. The terrain varies from sheer cliffs and dazzling canyons to more gently eroded badlands broken by shallow washes. The BLM currently manages the vast majority of this area, but like so many areas in Utah, it is dotted with state trust lands. While the Utah Enabling Act of 1894 was well intentioned in designating four sections from each township to finance public education within the new state of Utah, the proven result has been complicated land management.

The San Rafael Swell region is widely recognized as one worthy of special protection. This agreement places the overwhelming majority of the lands in Federal protection with some minor private inholdings remaining. All lands conveyed are subject to valid existing rights including grazing leases or permits.

In addition to the San Rafael acreage, other smaller transfers to Federal government management include 1,773 acres within the Manti-LaSal National Forest, 1,760 acres in Grand County and 6,452 acres in Washington County. The SITLA lands within the National Forest allow for the consolidation of additional lands that are difficult for the state to manage while providing productive alternatives for SITLA in other parts of Utah. Parcels conveyed in Washington County in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve are important habitat areas for species such as the threatened desert tortoise and will provide for further federal protection of significant natural resources and allow other state or privately owned lands elsewhere in Washington County to be developed.

Lands to be Conveyed to SITLA

Another aspect of this agreement would transfer about 133,000 acres of Federal lands to SITLA. These lands, primarily in Uintah County and Emery County, with lesser acreage in Utah, Washington and Sevier counties, comprise lands with revenue generating potential for SITLA. The transfers to SITLA include both surface and mineral interests, with two notable exceptions. In the case of the "UaUb Oil Shale Tract", the Federal government will receive a share of future oil shale revenues and in the case of "Walker Flat Coal Tract" the coal interest in those lands will revert to the Federal government after approximately \$46.5 million has been generated from coal production for SITLA's benefit. These provisions help to ensure that the Federal interest is protected.

Protection of the Federal interest has been a top priority for both the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture throughout negotiations over this exchange. This carefully crafted agreement provides a win for federal agencies managing their diverse lands in Utah, as well as the State of Utah and its schools who will generate much needed revenue while protecting sensitive resources.

Conclusion

The legislation before this Committee represents an opportunity to place high resource value lands into public ownership and management while allowing the State of Utah to enhance the return for its schoolchildren. This agreement accomplishes this in a responsible way with long term positive benefits for both the Federal government and the people of Utah.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department's views on H.R. 4968. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.

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