

Statement by Congressman Jim Matheson
“State School Trust Land Exchange”
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
June 27, 2002

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Christiansen, I want to thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify on this important piece of legislation.

This legislation seeks to remedy, through a common sense, collaborative approach, a very difficult challenge that we have in Utah.

For generations, the map of Utah has been divided and sub-divided then sub-divided again into a checkerboard pattern of ownership upon which all land use decisions have been made. Within this checkerboard are scattered 3.5 million acres of Utah’s school trust lands.

The checkerboard separates different parcels of trust land, and while these lands provide Utah schools with valuable royalties, they also limit development and planning for Utah lands and the surrounding communities.

Twenty years ago, Governor Scott Matheson, my father, proposed a new way to manage these lands. Project Bold, as he termed it, would consolidate many of the lands. It would partner the state, local communities, and the federal government in a collaborative effort to better manage Utah resources.

Project Bold was successful in many areas. It helped create more manageable lands while giving the state a better way to harness the wealth of its resources.

This legislation proposes to exchange approximately 108,000 acres of land currently administered by the Utah School and Institutional Land Administration for approximately 133,000 acres of federal land.

Mr. Chairman, the importance of this agreement for the people of Utah cannot be understated. I believe that when considering its value we need to keep in mind three points.

First, this agreement is an exchange of equal value. Often times when we are charged with legislating land exchanges, we find it challenging to take care of affected parties while keeping our trust with the American taxpayer.

This is one instance where we do not face that problem. The vast majority of the land in this exchange is from the San Rafael Swell area of central Utah. For those of you who have not been there, the Swell is a geological, botanical, and biological wonder that is a national treasure. It is an area about the size of Delaware made up of high mesas, deep slot canyons, untouched forests, pure rivers, and endangered animals.

Conveying the SITLA lands within the Swell to the federal government is one of the first steps we must take in preserving this treasure for future generations of Americans. SITLA will also be transferring lands

to protect the endangered desert tortoise as well as the Manti-Lasal National Forest. Protecting these resources is one of the basic tasks of our federal lands policies.

Secondly, I hope this Committee keeps in mind the cooperation that gave way to this legislation. Too often in Utah, the debate about how we manage our public lands comes down to butting heads rather cool-headed dialogue.

That was not the case for this agreement. SITLA sat down and talked through this deal with the Utah environmental community. Objections were raised and worked through. Agreements were found, and the values of all parties were respected. It is my hope that the existing concerns can be eased through continued communication.

I believe that this collaborative process signals a possible new era in the debate on our public lands. I hope that the lesson learned from this process is that all Utahns value and treasure our lands, and maybe we can begin to deal with the issues that have kept us apart for too long.

Finally, we should keep in mind why the School Trust Land program was created in the first place, and that is for the benefit and welfare of the children of Utah.

Utah has the fastest growing population in the country. We have the highest student to teacher ratio in the nation, and like many other states across this nation we are increasingly challenged to find resources for our growing school population.

This legislation provides us with some of the resources that Utah schools will need to successfully educate our children. The interest provided to the fund is what helps to supplement school budgets, the more royalties there are the more resources we can provide our children.

I want to thank the committee for inviting me here. I look forward to the swift passage of H.R. 4968.

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