

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Testimony

TESTIMONY OF PAULA M. PLANT
VICE-PRESIDENT OF UTAH STATE PTA
MAY 19, 1998

I am Paula M. Plant, Legislative Vice-President of Utah PTA. I have been involved in trust lands issues for seven years.

Education is one of the highest priorities for Utahns. We are among the leaders in performance in education, but we are among the lowest in per-pupil expenditures in the nation. We spend a greater percentage of the total state budget on education than any other state. Half of the annual budget goes to support public education. It is difficult to generate revenue for schools from property tax because only 21 percent of the state is privately held. The Federal government owns 68 percent of the lands, and seven percent belongs to the school trust. These trust lands were given to the state at Statehood, as the Governor has stated, for the benefit of the schoolchildren.

We experience the same difficulties as other states across the country. We have large classes, with growing populations of students attending school in trailers and on rotating schedules to accommodate larger enrollments than schools were built to hold. Classroom supply expenses and textbook fees are passed along to parents in every secondary school in the state. Our difficulties are magnified because of the inadequate revenue stream property taxes provide. In Utah, we stretch dollars to meet the needs of our children. Every nickel counts!

Utah PTA became involved in reforming the management of the school trust lands about a decade ago. Utah PTA lobbied for the Act of 1994 which created the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration, a new independent state agency with the responsibility of managing the trust solely for the benefit of the beneficiaries. The primary beneficiaries are Utah's schoolchildren.

We are immensely pleased about the progress the trust lands agency has made and believe the independence of the agency has been a key factor in the positive results over the past four years. They are doing a great job. The total asset values of the trust have increased more than 10 times since 1983. Utah's trust lands are now managed efficiently and effectively for the benefit of our school. We believe these results speak for themselves.

Utah PTA has been and continues to be the watchdog over our children's trust. We watch closely the activities of the agency and the Board of Trustees. We are in constant communication with the other education groups in Utah through the Utah State Public Education Coalition. We have worked together in the past on school trust issues. The initial announcement of the agreement between Governor Leavitt and Secretary Babbitt met with enthusiasm in our meeting last week. It is important to us that the fiduciary duties of all involved with the trust are met. We have been involved with the effort to trade the land out of federal reservations in our state and have worked over the past two years toward fair compensation for our schoolchildren for the trust lands captured within the monument. We understand the value of the land in this proposed land trade. We also understand that much of the trade is speculative where the mineral estate is

concerned.

Recognizing that the agreement signed by Governor Leavitt and Secretary Babbitt is only a first step in the process of this kind of exchange, we are enthusiastic and optimistic about the benefit this exchange could have for the schoolchildren of our state. We also recognize the social value of solitude and parks and are pleased that Utah has the opportunity to offer these treasures to the United States. This bill will protect both treasures - our school and our parks.

We have worked with our own state to see they fulfill their fiduciary responsibility to the schoolchildren. This is the opportunity for the federal government to fulfill theirs. The trust was established originally by the federal government to provide education to our children. As grantor of this trust in a solemn compact, the United States is also bound by a duty to ensure the school trust lands are used to support the public schools. This historic trade will allow the trust to accomplish that purpose.

Thank you.

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