

UTAHNS AIM FOR COMMON GROUND IN LAND-USE WAR

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Gov. Mike Leavitt and Utah's congressional delegation Saturday said they will press a fast-track wilderness bill they hope will end the constant bickering between environmentalists and multiple-use proponents across the nation.

But the governor said they had not discussed specific Utah acreages, which have ranged from 5.7 million acres down to 1.2 million.

Backed by Republican Sens. Orrin Hatch and Bob Bennett, Republican Reps. Enid Waldholtz and Jim Hansen and Democratic Rep. Bill Orton, the governor said the time is ripe to pass a bill that would please most Utahns.

New additions beyond the currently proposed 3.2 million Utah acres will be given serious consideration. But, they emphasized, the BLM's inventory process is over if their bill flies.

"Nothing is going to be ignored," said Hatch during a news conference at the governor's office. "Anybody who submits anything, we're going to look into it."

They also proposed "hard release" language that would exclude acreage not specifically designated in the bill when it is introduced. The lawmakers hope to file in both houses no later than June 1.

"It means they -the BLM} can't set up regulations that impose restrictions on those lands not named in the bill," Hatch added. Orton said lands not designated wilderness will be managed like other public lands.

The bill will make a "reasonable effort" to resolve ongoing land issues such as school-trust-land holdings, federally reserved water rights for wilderness, boundary setbacks for roads within or next to wilderness and aircraft overflights.

No alternative uses for lands not designated in the legislation will be proposed in the bill.

"The time is right for us to move forward to resolution," Leavitt said. And fears that the Republican juggernaut will leave the nation without any wilderness are unfounded. "There will be wilderness," he said.

Hatch said it is critical to push a bill that involves compromise and, hopefully, cooperation between opposing land-use groups. "Everybody won't get everything. But there will be a balance of interests that will hopefully satisfy the majority of Utahns."

Orton, whose 3rd Congressional District includes 90% of the current wilderness proposal, has suggested 1.2 million acres as wilderness and another 1.8 million acres of "conservation areas."

He urged all groups to get involved, but environmentalists were skeptical.

"They're looking for a way to ram this bill down the people's throats," said Lawson LeGate, regional coordinator for the Sierra Club. "The hard-release provision does not jibe with their past concept of protecting the land."

George Nickas, assistant coordinator for the Utah Wilderness Association, said he hoped the process will be as open as the bill's backers say.

That process begins with the governor and congressional delegates discussing options with affected parties -- counties, associations and land users. That process should be completed by April 1.

Then the backers will develop a discussion proposal and schedule open meetings around May 1 with a cross-section of interested parties and the Department of the Interior.

By then, all sides will have seen the proposal "and substantial comment may be expected at these meetings," according to a news release.

After bills are introduced in June, more hearings will follow.

"We also hope the delegation takes in ecological issues to protect and not try to minimize their importance," added Nikas. "But the hard-release provision is a major controversy. To release lands from study is not bad"

Why the hurry, asked Rudy Lukez, chairman of the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club.

"It makes me wonder if they're concerned the Republicans won't hold power for more than two years," Lukez said. "I have an uneasy feeling about this."