

WILDS STATUS MAY THWART NUCLEAR DUMP

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It's no secret Utah environmentalists and Gov. Mike Leavitt are oceans apart when it comes to resolving the decades-old battle over wilderness.

But the two sides may have found agreement on at least one parcel of potential wilderness, and it has political ramifications far beyond protecting pristine open space. The governor's office has confirmed that it is looking at possible wilderness designations of Bureau of Land Management lands on the west side of the Goshute Indian reservation in Tooele County. Such a designation could be used to block access by a company that wants to transport high-level nuclear waste to the reservation for temporary storage.

According to Brad Barber, deputy director of the governor's Office of Planning and Budget and Leavitt's chief negotiator on land issues, a proposed rail corridor to transport the waste passes through lands that are included in a wilderness inventory conducted by wilderness advocates.

"At this point in time, there is not a lot of information about the character of that land, but because it is in their (conservationists') inventory, it is worth consideration," Barber said. "Obviously, the storage of nuclear waste is a big issue, and we don't want this stuff in this state. And yes, we will take every legal means to stop it."

Leavitt recently returned from a meeting with Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt in which the two pledged to break the stalemate over wilderness. They agreed to first look at lands in Utah's west desert for possible wilderness designation.

Barber said the issue of using wilderness to block the shipment of nuclear waste was not discussed in the meeting, and he said the fact that lands around the reservation have been proposed as wilderness by citizen activists is "unequivocally coincidence."

Barber added that any wilderness proposal arising from the cooperative venture would encompass the entire west desert, not just a small area around the Skull Valley Indian Reservation, home to the Skull Valley band of the Goshutes.

"A couple of million acres will be evaluated," Barber said. "We certainly are not in disagreement on that one particular place. But no one should jump to immediate conclusions that the two very complicated issues are related."

Utah conservationists say Leavitt's willingness to consider lands included in their inventory is an unprecedented recognition of the validity of their survey of potential wilderness (BLM inventories are the only legally binding inventories).

"If protecting wilderness values stops a nuclear waste dump in this state, we are happy to work with the governor toward that goal," said Tom Price, spokesman for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

"Hopefully, the governor will view the rest of the citizens inventory in the same favorable light," he added.

Most of the lands under consideration in the west desert are not part of any official BLM inventory of potential wilderness areas. But they are part of the so-called "citizens inventory" conducted by hundreds of citizen volunteers that identified 9.1 million acres of potential wilderness statewide.

According to Price, "the west desert is wilderness at its most raw and subtle. At first glance, it is forbidding, but on greater reflection shows a tremendous diversity of life."

In his State of the State address, Leavitt reiterated his pledge to use every means possible to "build a moat" around the Goshute lands to block Private Fuel Storage from transporting nuclear waste to a proposed storage site on tribal lands.

If the BLM lands surrounding the reservation were designated wilderness, the consortium of large, out-of-state electrical utilities would not be allowed under federal wilderness laws to build a railroad spur line on those lands.

Sue Morton, spokeswoman for PFS, said the company was unfamiliar with Leavitt's wilderness proposals near the west deseret.

"But he has already said he would do anything to stop us, so nothing surprises us at this point," she said.

Barber said the state is not yet ready to offer a blanket recommendation for west desert wilderness. There are myriad issues to be considered, among them the realization that if "these lands are congressionally designated as wilderness, there will be wilderness there forever. We want to make sure that is what we want to do."

If the lands -- including the lands around the Goshute reservation -- do not qualify as wilderness, they will not be included in any wilderness deal, he said. "The citizens inventory suggests the lands have wilderness qualities, and that will be evaluated," Barber said.

Related to that issue, SUWA has been granted legal standing by the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board. That status is critical to SUWA's opposition to the nuclear waste storage facility, and it is rarely granted to organizations not directly impacted by proposed developments.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is currently considering the public safety and environmental impacts of the proposed nuclear waste storage facility, and public hearings may begin late in 1999 or early in 2000.