

WHITE HOUSE, LEAVITT STRIKE A LANDS DEAL MAY BE BREAKTHROUGH IN RAGING WILDS BATTLE

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The Clinton administration and Gov. Mike Leavitt have struck a deal that could result in more than 1 million acres of wilderness in Utah's West Desert -- a deal that would mark the first breakthrough in a vicious public lands battle that has raged in Utah for much of the past two decades.

Although the detailed language has yet to be worked out, the Deseret News has learned the deal calls for wilderness in seven Utah counties, all in the western part of the state. It also calls for School Trust lands to be traded for federal parcels elsewhere and resolution of long-standing disputes over ownership of dirt roads claimed by the affected counties and federal government.

"It's a good proposal," Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt told the Deseret News. Babbitt has been assigned the task of getting environmentalists to agree to the package. "There are details that need to be worked out, boundaries to be finalized, land exchanges. But I am very pleased with it."

Other details yet to be resolved include water rights, access roads, military overflights and buffer zones, but officials say there is "broad general agreement" on how those issues are to be resolved.

The deal comes after months of negotiations between the Department of Interior and officials in Leavitt's office. President Clinton, the White House's Council on Environmental Quality and leaders of the nation's most prominent environmental groups have all been briefed throughout the ongoing negotiations.

Environmental support for the proposal is critical to passage of any wilderness bill in Congress. The Utah Wilderness Coalition wants 2.6 million acres of wilderness in the same area where the Babbitt-Leavitt deal calls for slightly more than 1 million acres.

By comparison, a bill once introduced by Rep. Jim Hansen and later modified by then-Rep. Enid Greene Waldholtz called for only 400,000 acres of wilderness in the West Desert.

One official in the governor's office called it "a good, middle-ground proposal" that "meets the needs of both sides."

Heidi McIntosh, conservation director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, was in Washington, D.C., to meet with Babbitt on Thursday afternoon. She was unaware of the details of the proposal.

"We will sit back and listen and give it consideration, but we remain committed to the Red Rock Wilderness Act that has unprecedented support in Congress," she said. "That is where we are focusing our energy."

McIntosh said SUWA is still opposed to designating Utah wilderness in incremental parcels as Leavitt has suggested. But the idea of addressing half of the state in one package could have merit.

"If it's a two-step process, and it works in the West Desert, we would have to take a look at it for resolving (wilderness) in the rest of Utah," she said.

The wilderness deal does not address millions of acres of potential red-rock wilderness in the eastern and southeastern part of the state where the debate over wilderness designations is particularly rancorous.

"I really hope this (the West Desert wilderness deal) is a chance to have a healing process and to demonstrate it is possible in the West to find common ground between adversarial positions, that it is possible to find reasoned and mutually beneficial solutions," Babbitt said.

Although Babbitt recognizes the deal is a huge first step in breaking the decades-old stalemate over Utah wilderness, he was reluctant to predict resolution of the wilderness issues in the canyon country.

"I'm not into galactic statements," he said.

Besides, there is no guarantee the West Desert deal will pass muster with all of the various special interest groups.

The deal still faces potential opposition from county commissioners fearful of big wilderness and environmentalists opposed to a piecemeal approach to wilderness. On Friday, Leavitt will try to sell the package to county commissioners.

"The governor is very optimistic, but it is critical that he meet with all of the affected commissioners before he generates public discussion," said Leavitt spokeswoman Vicki Varela.

Babbitt also expressed cautious optimism, saying "If all the groups will agree to take a deep breath and look closely at what the package is, what the concept is all about, look at it in the spirit of breaking the impasse, that it's mutually beneficial, then there is reason for optimism."

Under terms of the deal, the Bureau of Land Management will cease its formal wilderness planning process for the West Desert and the package will go immediately to Congress. Utah's congressional delegation reportedly supports the package.

Hansen aides told the Deseret News they are aware of the negotiations and are happy with progress being made on wilderness.

Part of the deal apparently calls for Hansen to withdraw a provision that had environmentalists howling that he was stalling new wilderness designations in western Utah.

Hansen recently added in committee wording to the annual defense authorization bill that calls for studies of how new wilderness or wilderness study areas might affect military flights in the Utah Test and Training Range.

Until such a study was completed, that legislation would have stopped other environmental impact studies and other steps toward new wilderness protection in the area.

Bill Johnson, legislative director for Hansen, said Thursday that Hansen "plans to strike that language at the earliest appropriate parliamentary opportunity." That comes after discussion with Babbitt and Leavitt.

Those talks "convinced him that all agree that there should be no impact to the UTTR. That's all we want, and all the principals have agreed to it," Johnson said, adding, "Now that agreement has come to fruition, we no longer need to study the possibility of impacts -- so it's moot."

The wilderness deal will apparently not affect lands around the Goshute Indian reservation. County officials and some legislators have expressed concern that Leavitt would try to use wilderness designations as a means to block a proposed railroad spur that would carry high-level nuclear waste to tribal lands for temporary storage.

"It doesn't help the state at all with the Goshute problem," said one state official.

The negotiating team was apparently headed by Brad Barber and John Harja with the governor's Office of Planning and Budget, and Martha Hahn and Molly McUSIC with the Department of Interior.

Officials on both side said the negotiations were an outgrowth of recent successful negotiations resolving longstanding disputes over School Trust lands locked inside national parks.