

LEAVITT RETOOLS LAND SWAP AFTER DEAL IS STYMIED BY ENVIRONMENTAL LOBBYISTS

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A plan to designate slightly more than a million acres of wilderness in Utah's western desert will probably not be approved by Congress this year, Gov. Mike Leavitt conceded Thursday.

So the governor is attempting to salvage something from the faltering wilderness deal he negotiated last year with Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt.

He announced support for a scaled-down proposal to trade about 105,000 acres of scattered lands owned by the state school system that are within the proposed western Utah wilderness areas. The trade would clear one of the obstacles to someday providing permanent protection for the proposed wild lands.

"If we can participate in solving a major part of the [wilderness] dilemma, that is what we should do," Leavitt said during a news conference at the East Midvale Elementary School, where he announced the new proposal.

Members of Utah's congressional delegation and the Clinton administration have pledged to try to win approval for the land swap before the current session adjourns in early October.

Lawson LeGate, southwestern regional representative for the Sierra Club, said Thursday that he likes the concept of the land trade but wants to see the details before taking a position on the latest proposal. "It is a good idea to try to get state school-trust lands out of the middle of sensitive, publicly owned lands, especially those with wilderness values," he said.

The Sierra Club was part of a broad coalition of environmental groups that opposed the Leavitt-Babbitt wilderness proposal for western Utah, arguing it did not include enough land. The coalition's aggressive lobbying campaign against the 1 million-acre wilderness proposal helped kill the bill -- at least for this session of Congress.

Although the proposed land trade is only a small part of what the governor was trying to accomplish in western Utah, Leavitt put an optimistic spin on the revised deal, describing it as "a historic victory" for Utah schoolchildren.

When Utah was admitted to the union in 1896, it was given several thousand 1-square-mile sections of land scattered around the state to help generate revenue for the school system. Unfortunately, later designations of national forests, national parks, Indian reservations, military bases and potential wilderness areas left many of those lands essentially worthless islands in a sea of protected federal land.

Leavitt in 1998 negotiated a huge trade that removed 363,000 acres of school lands from national parks, national forests and tribal lands. In return, the state received about 145,000 acres of developable land and \$50 million in cash.

In this new deal, Leavitt is proposing to trade 105,000 acres of state land in potential wilderness areas of western Utah for 17 parcels of potentially developable federal land totaling 107,000 acres.

Beaver County Commissioner Chad Johnson said he supports the deal because it would move into state ownership a large tract in the Wah Wah Valley that might be used as a spaceport for the Venture Star, a proposed reusable space vehicle.

"We would rather work with the state than the feds on this project," he said.

The state would also acquire large tracts of land around Oak City and near the Intermountain Power Plant in Millard County; near Eureka in Juab County; and in Rush Valley and at the northern end of Skull Valley in Tooele County.