

Bennett pushes S. Utah land bill

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. Bob Bennett introduced legislation in the Senate on Tuesday that would make sweeping changes in public lands in Utah's Washington County.

Bennett, R-Utah, is co-sponsoring the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2006 with Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, who plans to introduce the legislation in the House of Representatives later this week.

"No one disputes the dramatic growth occurring in Washington County," said Bennett. "But we can't simply acknowledge the growth. We have to find a way to responsibly manage it."

Matheson said Tuesday that the two lawmakers looked at hundreds of comments from stakeholders about the draft proposal that they unveiled in March. "I am pleased that the bill incorporates many important changes that help us balance protection for public lands with responsible growth," he said.

Washington County Commissioner Jim Eardley said Tuesday that he is a "big supporter" of the public-lands bill, which he called a "compromise" between various stakeholders.

"It is an important piece of legislation," Eardley said. "It's good for the county."

But Scott Groene with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance said he is "extremely disappointed" in Bennett and Matheson for moving the bill forward without holding additional public hearings in the state.

"We thought we were in the middle of negotiations with them, and we were surprised it was introduced in the Senate today," said Groene on Tuesday. "This legislation is bad for wilderness and bad for taxpayers."

The final bill contains several changes from the draft that lawmakers initially released in March. According to Bennett's office, the changes include removal of a proposed dam site in the environmentally sensitive Beaver Dam

Wash area and postponement of designating a specific route through land set aside as a protected reserve for desert tortoises, pending more study.

The bill calls for selling about 25,000 acres of "non- environmentally sensitive public land," which represents about 1.5 percent of lands in Washington County, Bennett said. The public

lands designated for sale would be identified through a growth- planning process that is locally driven, according to the bill.

The measure would also establish water, transportation and utility corridors, including a route for the Lake Powell Pipeline.

The bill designates 165.5 miles of the Virgin River in and adjacent to Zion National Park under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the first such designation in Utah history.

The legislation also would add 219,725 acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System, including 123,743 acres of National Park Service land within Zion National Park; 93,340 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land; and 2,642 acres of Forest Service land. This would increase the percentage of wilderness acreage in the county from 3.4 percent to 17.5 percent.

The bill also would create the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area to provide long-term protection for the desert tortoise and recreational opportunities, according to Bennett.

The measure will now be sent to the Senate Energy Committee, where it will be the subject of hearings later this month, Bennett said. The House Resources Committee will also hold hearings on the proposed legislation later this summer.