

Wilderness Breakthrough?

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Gov. Mike Leavitt has gone wild. Just four years after he supported a Utah congressional delegation bill for only 2 million acres of Bureau of Land Management wilderness in the whole state, his administration is now advocating 1 million acres of wilderness just along the state's western border. His proposal is laudable, not only for the significant protection it offers to West Desert lands, but also for the prospect of wilderness peace that it sparks.

Leavitt has tried to play the part of wilderness conciliator ever since the last attempt at legislation, which began with statewide hearings in 1995, went up in flames early in 1996. He didn't have much success, though, until he found the right formula: partnering with Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. The two of them broke the age-old deadlock over school trust lands last year, and now their staffs have taken a crack at wilderness.

Their plan offers hope for eventually solving Utah's contentious wilderness debate. It is predicated on the incremental approach that Leavitt first proposed in 1996 -- that is, dropping the strategy of running a single Utah wilderness bill through Congress, finding areas of general agreement, and proposing separate bills on those.

Leavitt said this past winter that he and the secretary were going to focus first on wilderness for Utah's West Desert, and his announcement last week, though lacking the specific details that eventually will have to be written into legislation, represented the fruits of that labor. If Leavitt and Babbitt can bring their constituencies together on this proposal, it may signal a new spirit of cooperation for solving the hard stuff -- Utah's red-rock wilderness.

By any standard that existed before the environmentalist Utah Wilderness Coalition moved its goalposts last year (from 5.7 million acres to 9 million), the Leavitt-Babbitt proposal is a pro-wilderness one. It recommends about 1 million acres of BLM land for wilderness designation in the seven counties that border Nevada. By comparison, the UWC's old recommendation called for about 870,000 acres of wilderness in those counties. And the BLM's wilderness study areas in those counties comprised about 570,000 acres. By the numbers, at least, it will be difficult for those who chanted "5-point-7" all those years to find fault with this proposal; it calls for more acreage than the old UWC recommendation did.

The problem will be convincing the seven counties. When they made their wilderness recommendations in 1995, they proposed a total of just 184,000 acres. So they will have to swallow hard. But with assurances that the Utah Test and Training Range will not be affected and that the issues of roads and school trust lands will be forthrightly negotiated, they may be persuaded.

The most important thing now is to craft a responsible bill that is not encumbered by the hard-release language and the disclaimers that helped to sink the 1995 bill.

If the Leavitt-Babbitt proposal is transformed into a good bill that passes Congress, Utah will have taken a remarkable step toward a resolution on BLM wilderness.