

## Breaking the public lands impasse in Washington County

Bob Bennett and Jim Matheson (26 April 08)

The debate over how to manage growth and preserve public lands in Utah has been wedged in a stalemate for decades. The Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2008 is the compromise that breaks the impasse and strikes a balance between conservation and growth.

The wilderness debate in Utah is characterized by a lot of rhetoric but very little progress. With this bill, conservation groups that once opposed our efforts are now endorsing the 2008 legislation recognizing the great strides taken to protect wilderness.

William Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society, said it best when testifying that this bill "represents a breakthrough in what has been a long polarized debate in Utah over land protection."

The bill designates 264,394 acres of public land as wilderness, which means one out of every five acres, or 20 percent, in Washington County will be wilderness.

Other conservation provisions include the first Wild and Scenic River designation in Utah spanning 165.5 miles of the Virgin River, the creation of two National Conservation Areas to protect the desert tortoise on nearly 140,000 acres and enhanced management of off-highway vehicles. We also have prohibited motorized travel in national conservation areas except on designated roads.

Some have raised concerns with the sale and proceeds of non-environmentally sensitive public lands. The lands directed for sale represent less than three-tenths of 1 percent of all land in the county.

Why are public lands for sale in the first place? The Bureau of Land Management has identified lands to dispose of, which will happen with or without this legislation. The proceeds from the sale of these low-priority lands will be used to acquire other environmentally significant lands in the county, including the private inholdings in Zion National Park and the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve.

This will reconfigure federal ownership in a way that makes sense. This framework ensures that 100 percent of the money stays in Washington County rather than being spent elsewhere or sent back to the U.S. Treasury.

The rapid growth and high concentration of public lands create an incredible amount of pressure on the county. To ensure the county is equipped to handle the pressure, the bill authorizes the BLM to identify up to 5,000 additional acres for disposal through a restrictive land sale process. This number is a cap and not a target.

These lands can only be considered for sale once they are identified in the resource management plan and in accordance with Vision Dixie, the locally driven planning effort.

The land sale proceeds will benefit both the county and conservation efforts. Eighty-five percent of the proceeds will go toward land acquisition, conservation projects and enforcement of wilderness. Five percent will support Utah schoolchildren and 10 percent will help the county manage growth and continue the implementation of Vision Dixie.

County funds can only be used for limited purposes such as fire protection, flood control, public safety and transportation needs, and parks and conservation efforts.

The remarkable lands we protect in this legislation are the same lands that attract residents to southern Utah each year. Continued unbridled growth in Washington County, without these protections, will be devastating to our public lands and natural resources.

We have reached an unprecedented consensus in the Utah public lands debate. We must take advantage of this opportunity before it's too late.

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\* SEN. BOB BENNETT and REP. JIM MATHESON represent Utah in Congress.