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Land swap proposed

Deal would protect S. Utah wilderness, senators say

By Jerry D. Spangler and Joe Bauman

Deseret Morning News

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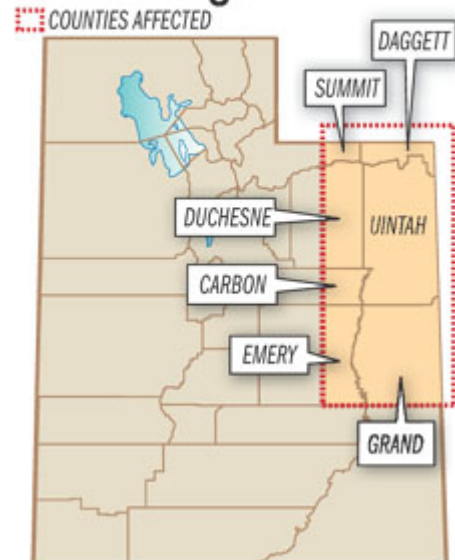
WASHINGTON — Utah's Republican Sens. Bob Bennett and Orrin Hatch are wading into the shark-infested Colorado River — or at least they are wading into the land politics of southeastern Utah. And the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance is praising the move.

Both senators introduced legislation Thursday calling for an exchange of state School Trust lands in the Moab area for an equal amount of land somewhere else that can be developed.

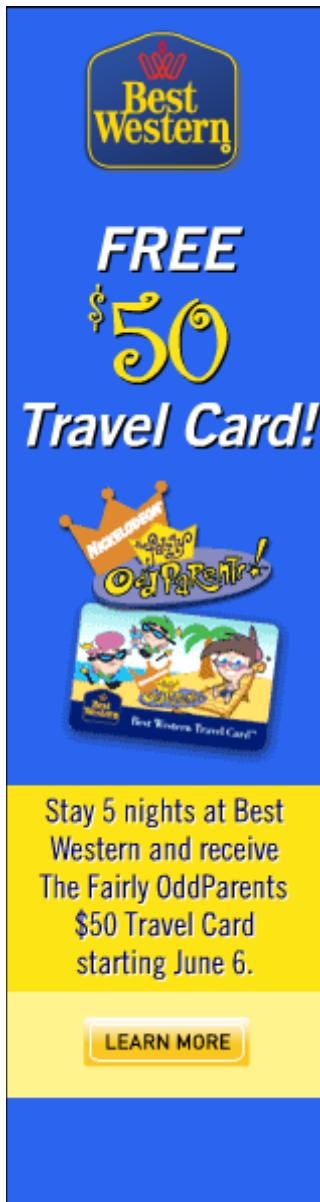
The trust "currently owns some of the most spectacular lands in America, located along the Colorado River in southeastern Utah," Bennett said. The legislation will trade those lands "into federal ownership and for the benefit of future generations."

According to Bennett, the state would give up roughly 40,000 acres along the Colorado River corridor to better protect views of Arches National Park, the famous Kokopelli and Slickrock bicycle trails, wilderness study areas and Westwater Canyon, one of the world's premier whitewater rafting

Proposed recreation land exchange



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In return, "the schoolchildren of Utah will receive mineral and development lands that are not environmentally sensitive in locations where responsible development makes sense," Bennett said.

The location of those lands was not indicated, but Bennett promised that it would be an "equal value exchange" based on a "valuation process that is transparent to the public, yet will ensure the exchange process occurs in a timely manner."

The last time the federal government attempted a land exchange in the San Rafael Swell area, it came unraveled when government insiders alleged that the state of Utah was getting far more value in return than what it was giving up.

But two other land exchanges have gone through. In 1998, Congress consolidated hundreds of thousands of acres of school trust lands inside parks, monuments and Indian reservations. And again in 2000, another exchange occurred for another 100,000 acres.

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It was after the second exchange that appraisers for the Bureau of Land Management began coming forward with allegations that U.S. taxpayers were giving up far more than they were getting in the deals.

This time, Bennett says the recreational and environmental communities are on board with the

trade, as well as state and local governments and the Department of Interior.

"These efforts serve a dual purpose as they help the federal land management agencies to consolidate federal lands in environmentally sensitive areas that can then be reasonably managed," Bennett said.

The other purpose is that developable lands could generate considerable revenue to the school trust fund.

Pete Downing, legislative director for SUWA, said the environmental group is positive about the proposal. "It recognizes many magnificent wilderness quality landscapes that are proposed for wilderness designation in America's Red Rock Wilderness act and that deserve protection," he said.

The bill he mentioned is the one introduced long ago by then-

Rep. Wayne Owens, D-Utah, which aimed at designating 5.7 million acres of BLM wilderness in Utah.

Parcels that the federal government would acquire in the trade, he said, "are worth protecting, and essentially that's why they're singled out in the legislation for conservation purposes."

Downing said a broad consensus has developed about protecting these lands. He said he hopes that "will help give this legislation life in Congress."

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