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Scandal-tainted worker was BLM teacher

By Christopher Smith
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WASHINGTON -- Some Bureau of Land Management employees attending a training seminar on negotiating land exchanges this month were surprised their instructor was a BLM staffer disciplined for her role in the scandal-plagued San Rafael Swell land swap.

Terry Catlin, a BLM lands specialist at the agency's Salt Lake City state headquarters, served as one of the instructors of a weeklong course on land exchanges for BLM professionals Dec. 8-12 in Asheville, N.C.

In August, the Interior Department's inspector general determined that Catlin and three other federal employees had negotiated a land exchange with the state of Utah that would have shortchanged taxpayers at least \$100 million because of an unusually lopsided oil-shale royalty split that was never clearly revealed to members of Congress and Interior decision-makers.

Upon receiving the report of the internal investigation, Interior Secretary Gale Norton canceled the agreement with the state for the land exchange, which had passed the House last year but died in the Senate amid questions over whether it was truly an "equal value" swap of federal lands for state school trust lands inside the aborted San Rafael National Monument.

Catlin and the three other Interior and BLM employees who were found to have acted improperly in negotiating the San Rafael deal were subjected to undisclosed disciplinary actions in what Senate Finance Committee Chairman Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, called "part of a troubling culture of cover-up and conceal."

This month, some BLM employees attending the agency's National Training Center course in "Complex Land Tenure Adjustment" contacted a land exchange watchdog group to express their astonishment that Catlin was one of their instructors.

"That they'd put her in charge of training staff, with her terrible record, is just absurd," said Janine Blaeloch, director of the Western Land Exchange Project in Seattle, which has assisted BLM employees who blew the whistle on the San Rafael deal. "She helped put together one of the worst public land deals in history, but in the BLM that kind of conduct does not go unrewarded."

Interior and BLM officials in Washington couldn't say Monday why Catlin was selected to be one of the teachers in the land exchange training class, although one speculated the instructors for the courses were selected and scheduled before the agency's disciplinary actions were taken this month.

Grassley said in a statement earlier this month that he was satisfied with the personnel actions taken in response to the San Rafael probe. A spokesman for Norton said the agency will not publicly discuss what discipline Catlin and the three other employees received.

"It's a long-standing practice at the Department of Interior not to comment on particular personnel matters," said Mark Pfeifle, Norton's press secretary.

The revelations of the San Rafael probe and other investigations of the BLM land exchange program by government auditors prompted Norton to make radical changes to the program that seeks to improve public land management by consolidating "checkerboard" federal and state parcels established during the frontier settlement period of the West.

In November, Norton consolidated all department land-valuation functions into a new Office of Appraisal

Services to allow appraisers to make professional estimations on land values without fear of reprisal by superiors. Norton also created a task force led by Assistant Interior Secretary Lynn Scarlett that is developing guidelines and internal controls for processing land swaps that are mandated by Congress to avoid some of the pitfalls revealed in the San Rafael investigation.

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