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## Interior Asks for More Time to Study Utah Land Proposal

**BY CHRISTOPHER SMITH**  
**THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE**

WASHINGTON -- The Department of Interior has asked for more time to respond to a federal whistle-blower's allegation that a proposed swap of Utah school trust lands and federal property of "equal value" was actually rigged to be \$100 million in the state's favor.

Utah Bureau of Land Management appraiser Kent Wilkinson's complaint with the Office of the Special Counsel (OSC), an independent federal agency that protects civil servant whistle-blowers from reprisals, claimed a lopsided trade helped kill legislation sponsored by Utah's congressional delegation.

The bill, which passed the House but died in the Senate, would have traded 137,000 acres of BLM land in Utah for 108,000 acres of state school trust lands scattered in the San Rafael Swell.

Wilkinson and other Utah BLM employees produced documents indicating the federal lands may be worth \$97 million to \$117 million more than the \$35 million price tag attached by Washington BLM land exchange leaders.

The OSC concluded Sept. 30 that there was "substantial

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likelihood" a top federal real estate negotiator had abused her authority and ignored warnings from six BLM staffers the trade was imbalanced. The OSC ordered Interior Secretary Gale Norton to investigate Wilkinson's claim and report back in 60 days.

But Interior officials recently told the OSC they could not meet the Dec. 3 deadline.

"We have granted an extension for the Utah land deal for Feb. 3 at the agency's request," said Jane McFarland, OSC director of congressional and public affairs.

Wilkinson claimed that Terry Catlin, leader of BLM's national land exchange team determined federal parcels in the deal were of approximate equal value to the state lands without making a good-faith effort to properly value a "significant portion" of the federal ground.

Catlin was allegedly aware of BLM appraisal data showing the federal lands had "significantly higher market value than the state land," according to the OSC notice.

Catlin has said she will be cleared of any wrongdoing in the investigation.

Gov. Mike Leavitt had sought the trade to consolidate federal lands in the Swell for possible designation as a new national monument, although that idea was recently scrapped following defeat of a public referendum in Emery County.

Janine Blaeloch of the Seattle-based Western Land Exchange Project contends boosting the coffers of the State Institutional Trust Lands Administration always was the guiding force behind the trade, not the monument designation. She suspects the San Rafael swap bill will be resurrected in the new Congress, and argues Norton is not protecting the interests of federal taxpayers in such lopsided trades.

"Catlin did wrong, but the real responsibility lies much higher in Interior," said Blaeloch. "It makes you wonder how credible the investigation will be."

Interior's investigation is one of a series of recent probes into BLM's appraisal practices. The Interior Department's inspector general also has begun an investigation into the San Rafael deal.

The Appraisal Foundation, authorized by Congress to set national appraisal standards, issued a study in October that was critical of BLM's practices. The study was paid for by BLM under direction from the Inspector General's Office, which reported problems in July 2001 with another Utah BLM land exchange.

The foundation recommended the Department of Justice

review recent exchanges and called for a moratorium on land exchanges until BLM could complete a "comprehensive overhaul" of its appraisal system.

While critical of the Appraisal Foundation report, BLM officials subsequently launched a 90-day review of all land exchanges currently in process or under discussion.

BLM bosses were especially stung by the Appraisal Foundation study, according to a draft of internal communications obtained by the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), which is assisting Wilkinson with his OSC disclosure. BLM officials even considered not paying the foundation for the study because of its unflattering conclusions.

But Utah BLM appraisers said in a Sept. 12 conference call with other agency appraisers that the San Rafael exchange was so fraught with unethical meddling by the Washington office that it was an easy target for the foundation's study.

"This San Rafael issue out here is just absolutely a gem for them to hone in on because there was absolute manipulation in the Washington office by the numbers in the Washington Exchange team of what we did out here," said Richard Rawson, Wilkinson's boss in the Utah BLM state office, according to a transcript of the call obtained by PEER. "Absolutely it was manipulated for the benefit of the negotiating team in this major exchange and uh-oh, I was scared to death that they would hone in on this and use this as an example."

Rawson did not return a call Wednesday from The Salt Lake Tribune seeking comment.

PEER officials said they have offered whistle-blower protection to Rawson and other Utah BLM employees who, like Wilkinson, may fear retaliation for exposing the problems in the appraisal program.

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