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## McCain receives earful on land trade

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- [Outdoors](#)
- [Health & Medicine](#)
- [Legals](#)
- [Religion](#)
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FLAGSTAFF and CAMP VERDE -- U.S. Sen. John McCain paid visits to Flagstaff and Camp Verde Saturday to share his thoughts on the Yavapai Ranch land exchange and to listen to concerns of residents.

Flagstaff City Hall filled with 190 people who came to hear McCain talk about his sponsoring of legislation for the land exchange. It was a modest showing, both in attendance and expressed concerns when compared to the Camp Verde meeting at the town's public schools complex.

Nearly 600 people filled the 454-seat auditorium in Camp Verde and nearly all comments and questions were critical of the land trade.

Deemed the largest and most complex land exchange in the state of Arizona, the proposed trade allows the Forest Service to gain private ranch inholdings and consolidate a combined 70,000 acres while trading off lands that border municipalities.

"I have never been involved in a single issue in northern Arizona that has generated this much interest," McCain said at the Flagstaff meeting. "Nor have I seen one as controversial."

Sen. Jon Kyl was supposed to attend both meetings but did not make it. McCain passed along Kyl's apologies, but no reason was given for his lack of attendance. Kyl co-sponsored the Senate bill, which awaits a vote. The House version introduced by U.S. Rep. Rick Renzi, R-Flagstaff, passed in late November.

At both meetings, McCain shared his views of the exchange and explained that he supported the legislative land swap to move the process forward in a reasonable period of time --but he noted his concerns for the Verde Valley water supply. That's been a major concern of those who detract the proposal.

"I have concerns with the water," the senator told the Camp Verde audience. "Water is the key vital issue for the state of Arizona."

His comments were followed by presentations from Prescott National Forest Supervisor Michael King on the merits of the exchange for the Prescott forest,

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which deals with the administrative headaches of managing a checkerboard landscape of private-public land.



King told both audiences that the Forest Service wanted to consolidate the checkerboard, with 85 separate private inholdings, in order to better manage the land that's considered important for its antelope run and large stands of ponderosa and mixed forests.

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If the legislation goes through, the Forest Service trades out land it has in Flagstaff, mainly around the airport, Williams, Camp Verde, Clarkdale and Prescott to Yavapai Ranch holdings. The ranch is headed by Fred Ruskin.



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A 2,200-acre Forest Service land parcel near Interstate 17 and Camp Verde and an 820-acre parcel near Clarkdale have fueled opposition to the land trade among a number of residents there.

There's a concern about water as it pertains to development on the land.

The Camp Verde meeting became more contentious than the Flagstaff gathering, where comments and questions split between concerns of the environmental process and support of the land trade for economic reasons. The land trade would allow Flagstaff the chance to expand its business park and free up space for a future airport expansion.

Before McCain spoke in Camp Verde, town resident Deborah Moody paraded up and down the aisles of the crowded auditorium, shouting "Keep the Verde verde, without the water, it won't be!" The chant referenced verde, the Spanish word for "green."

Moody said she was "doing her part as an American" by vocalizing her opinion before the meeting. She said that she was half-for and half-against the land trade. Her main concerns lay with the water problems in the valley.

Clarkdale resident Marsha Foutz said she also had concerns with how the land swap could bring added commercial development in a town with water supply problems. A member of the Friends of the Verde, she passed out bumper stickers that read "No Water, No Future, No Ruskin Land Grab" at the front door of the auditorium.

She said that a number of residents in the Verde Valley have slowly but surely become concerned about the land trade.



"It took awhile for things to get rolling," Foutz said. "We had this 'Mayberry' mentality, where people wanted to trust their leadership. But people started to realize how this was going to impact them."

As for McCain's visit, a number of people grumbled that it was "window dressing." Jerome resident Wally Coates said he did not think McCain would abandon or seriously change the Senate bill he introduced to get the land exchange passed.

"I believe it's a done deal," said Coates, who is concerned about the water problems. He carried a "No Ruskin" sign with him.

USGS reports indicate that groundwater pumping in the Verde Valley is exceeding the aquifer recharge in a normal rainfall year by 156 percent. By comparison, groundwater pumping in the Flagstaff-Williams-Tusayan region is just 5 percent of the annual recharge.

If the exchange goes through with the Verde Valley parcels, it would potentially allow Yavapai Ranch holdings to develop the land commercially.

If the Senate approves its version of the land exchange, the appraisal process for the trade will start. The trade will allow Yavapai Ranch to give 35,000 acres of its inholdings -- private land surrounded by public land -- to the Forest Service in an area south of Seligman.

Flagstaff officials have supported the exchange because it will allow them to acquire land from the ranch that's part of the trade. It includes parcels that could open future airport expansion and expansion of the airport's business park.

The exchange, if it happens, will represent the largest public-for-private land exchange in Arizona in about 50 years.

The proposed legislative land swap has attracted national attention among groups and citizens who have concerns about public land trades.

Janine Blaeloch of the Western Land Exchange Project based in Seattle, traveled to northern Arizona to attend both meetings.

She said of the 70 land trades her organization is contesting across the country, Yavapai Ranch ranks in the top three as far as priority. Blaeloch, who has followed the Yavapai proposal since 1999, explained how the legislative trade dodges the National Environmental Policy Act. NEPA requires in-depth study, public involvement and a list of alternatives.

"It's important to develop those alternatives," she said.

At both meetings, McCain defended his decision to approach the land exchange from a legislative standpoint, saying that the complexity of the trade would tie up the trade in NEPA for years.

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