

BLM Addresses Utah Land Swap

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WASHINGTON — The Bureau of Land Management is ordering its state directors to protect the public interest when reviewing federal land exchanges after the program drew fire last year over a questionable Utah land swap.

"Because the integrity of the program had been so severely challenged ... we had to show the public that we took these seriously," BLM Deputy Director Jim Hughes said in an interview.

A BLM memorandum Hughes sent earlier this month reinforces an earlier directive requiring all proposed exchanges of BLM land to be approved by him.

"State directors are responsible for ensuring the integrity of the land exchange and appraisal programs," said the memo sent to BLM state directors this month. "Before recommending a land exchange for further consideration or approval, you must ensure the public interest will be served and that statutory, regulatory, policy and other requirements are met."

Last year, BLM appraisers protested a proposed land swap with Utah

that would have cleared the way for the creation of a national monument in the San Rafael Swell, a series of steep canyons in eastern Utah.

Utah officials wanted 137,166 acres of federal land in several chunks in exchange for 108,264 acres of state parcels across the San Rafael Swell.

One BLM document cited by one appraiser said the exchange could cost federal taxpayers \$117 million.

Separate investigations of the land swap are under way by the Interior Department's inspector general and the department itself.

Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, who sponsored failed legislation to get the land exchange through Congress, says he plans to push for approval of the exchange again this year.

A scathing report in October by the Appraisal Foundation suggested a moratorium on BLM land exchanges and said the Justice Department should investigate.

Hughes said a moratorium would have killed a series of important exchanges that were under way. By putting his own stamp on any land exchange, Hughes said he hopes to restore credibility to the process.

"We're serious about making the program work. We're serious about maintaining its integrity," he said.

In addition to the latest allegations relating to the Utah swap, earlier land exchanges were harshly criticized by the Interior Department's inspector general and in a report to Congress by the General Accounting Office.

Janine Blaeloch of the Seattle-based Western Land Exchange Project, said she believes that most of the "corrupt and incompetent rip-offs" in the past have had at least tacit backing from the Washington office and officials at Interior. She said she is encouraged that BLM appears to be taking the issue seriously.

A panel that will review BLM's exchange procedure is stocked with credible, knowledgeable people, she said.

"I think what BLM is thinking is we don't want our authority to do land trades taken away from us," she said.

The BLM plans to make an announcement today, laying out a blueprint for future reforms to land exchanges, Hughes said.