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Sunday, April 18, 2004  
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LETTER: Blame BLM corner cutting for delay in Lincoln County land sales

Agency failed to look at impacts of numerous projects planned in the area

To the editor:

A recent Review-Journal editorial blasted environmental groups that successfully challenged the BLM for selling public land in Lincoln County without sufficient environmental analysis ("Putting people last," March 26). The editorial was so inaccurate that we can only assume no one read the court order or checked the facts.

The Virgin River and imperiled species will unquestionably be harmed if these lands are developed, but the focus of the case was not, as you mistakenly stated, the desert tortoise and the Endangered Species Act. Regardless of the fact that the act was not at issue, the Review-Journal rushed to conclude that our case showed the need to gut or repeal that law. This kind of baseless ax-grinding does a great disservice to your readers.

In fact, the BLM violated the National Environmental Policy Act by -- among other failures -- failing to consider the impacts of numerous public land sales, exchanges and other projects planned in the Mesquite area in addition to the Lincoln County Land Act sale. Even knowing that more than 36,000 acres are proposed to be developed and an additional 200,000 people are projected to live in the area, the BLM unwisely ignored these issues. Considering that there may not be enough water to sustain existing development in southeastern Nevada, wouldn't it make more sense not to keep stumbling blindly into the future? The court upheld this logic, and under NEPA found the BLM's "act now, study later" plan illegal.

Putting together an environmental impact statement

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should take about a year, not the two years BLM is citing. Whatever the case, blame the delay on the agency -- it cut corners; it broke the law.

The Review-Journal ludicrously branded us as "carpetbaggers" for daring to challenge an action outside the states where we are based. This lawsuit had the backing of the plaintiffs' many members in Nevada. Our legal and moral interest in Lincoln County's federal land is no less than that of any Nevadan. Every single American citizen has an interest in the welfare of public lands and in seeing that the Bush Administration complies with the law.

KATIE FITE

BOISE, IDAHO

JANINE BLAELOCH

SEATTLE

DANIEL PATTERSON

TUCSON

Ms. Fite is with the Committee for the High Desert, Ms. Blaeloch is with the Western Land Exchange Project, and Mr. Patterson is with the Center for Biological Diversity.

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