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# Inspector General: Utah land swap was lopsided, would have cost federal taxpayers

By ROBERT GEHRKE

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - A land swap pushed by Utah

officials would have shortchanged the federal government had concerns from whistleblowers not stopped the deal, the Interior Department's inspector general concluded in a report obtained Wednesday.

The report by investigator Jack E. Hawkins found that Interior Department officials negotiated away valuable resources, did not properly appraise land and that the department's chief negotiator "made efforts to conceal the actual results of the negotiations from department decision-makers and from the United States Congress."

As a result of the investigation, the Interior Department and Gov. Mike Leavitt agreed to terminate the agreement and Interior Secretary Gale Norton ordered a working group already investigating disparities in other land exchanges to include the Utah deal in its review.

"Based on this report, it is evident that the agreement was not based on an exchange of lands 'approximately equal in value,' although it was portrayed as such," Norton wrote in a letter to U.S. Rep. Chris Cannon, who sponsored legislation enacting the land swap.

"The Department of Interior bears the responsibility for ensuring that we present accurate facts to the Congress and the public," Norton wrote. "In this instance, we did not live up to that responsibility."

The U.S. Attorney's office has declined to file charges in relation to the deal.

The Interior Department's inspector general has launched an additional

Day	Date	Event	Time
Sunday	June 8	Rough Stock Round	4:00 pm
Monday	June 9	Slack Round	7:00 am
Tuesday	June 10	Slack Round	7:00 am
		Performance	7:15 pm
Wednesday	June 11	Performance	7:15 pm
Thursday	June 12	Performance	7:15 pm
Friday	June 13	Performance	7:15 pm
Saturday	June 14	Championship	7:15 pm

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investigation into BLM Director Kathleen Clarke's role in the exchange. Clarke, the former director of the Utah Department of Natural Resources took part in briefings on the issue, although she had orally recused herself from involvement.

The inspector general's report, obtained by The Associated Press on Wednesday, also chastised Tom Fulton, the former deputy assistant secretary for Lands and Minerals Management, for providing misleading information to Congress and Interior Department officials about the deal.

John Harja, Utah's chief negotiator, disputed the inspector general's findings.

"Congress clearly knew the deal. Nobody was fooled," Harja said. "I haven't heard one thing in the IG's report that validates anything the whistleblower says."

He did concede, however, that it is impractical to pursue the deal because the values of the lands have changed in the past year and the deal would have to be re-evaluated.

The land swap would have consolidated federal land in Utah's picturesque San Rafael Swell, a maze of redrock slot canyons and bluffs, facilitating a request from Leavitt that President Bush declare the area a national monument - an idea abandoned amid local opposition.

Utah would have given up about 108,119 acres of land in exchange for 139,979 acres of federal lands. The newly acquired lands would be part of Utah's school trust lands, with proceeds from mineral development and other uses helping to fund Utah schools.

But Bureau of Land Management appraiser Kent Wilkinson and other BLM whistleblowers told The Associated Press a year ago that the land was not appropriately appraised and if the deal went through it could cost federal taxpayers as much as \$116.7 million in valuable mineral revenues.

The inspector general did not quantify how much the federal government would have lost in the deal.

At the time of the allegations, Cannon railed against Wilkinson and the whistleblowers, saying their claims were unsubstantiated and even meeting with Wilkinson's boss to suggest "strong measures" be taken against him for what Cannon considered insubordination.

Cannon's spokeswoman, Meghan Riding, said Wednesday evening the congressman would not comment until he had time to fully review the inspector general's findings.

Despite the allegations of wrongdoing, the House hurriedly passed the legislation without debate on the floor last year, but it was not considered by the

Senate.

"I would never ever have expected this," said Janine Blaeloch of the Western Land Exchange Project. "With all of the bumbling and refusal to take responsibility that has characterized the BLM over this whole thing, it never would have occurred to me that the Interior Department would have taken responsibility and said yes, we made a mistake."

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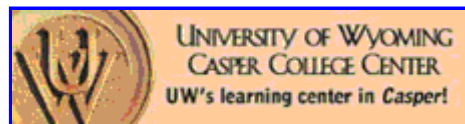
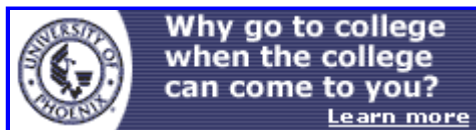
On the Net:

Bureau of Land Management: <http://www.blm.gov>

Utah school trust lands: <http://www.utahtrustlands.com>

Western Land Exchange Project: <http://www.westlx.org>

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