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'Closed-door deal' at BLM? Congressman blasts Utah oil, gas plans and calls for probe

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The Salt Lake Tribune

WASHINGTON - A New York congressman is calling for an investigation into whether Utah's new Bureau of Land Management director violated the public trust by pledging to help open federal lands to oil and gas development.

A memo released Tuesday by environmentalists and written last month by Robert Weidner, a lobbyist for several Utah counties, says that Henry Bisson, the state's interim BLM director, and the national BLM deputy director, Jim Hughes, promised to take steps to "promote economic growth and reduce restrictions on access to the public lands."

The memo reported on a meeting attended by commissioners from booming oil and gas counties and representatives from 10 major oil companies drilling in the state.

Environmentalists and New York Democratic Rep. Maurice Hinchey, a longtime advocate of environmental causes and Utah wilderness, blasted the arrangement as "apparently illegal" and sent a letter to Interior Department Inspector General Earl Devaney asking for an investigation into the conduct of Hughes and Bisson.

"It seems, based on the information we have, that private, behind-closed-door deals have been made between BLM officials and individuals who are intent in probing these public lands, to rig new land-use plans that . . . could provide for various kinds of drilling," Hinchey said.

The BLM responded in a statement that meeting with groups interested in land-use planning is an important part of the planning process.

"It is fully appropriate for the BLM to meet with local governments at their request. Local governments are cooperating agencies in land-use planning," the agency said in its statement. "If the Department of the Interior's Inspector General chooses to review this matter, the BLM is confident its involvement with cooperating agencies will be viewed as fully appropriate by parties from inside and outside of Utah."

Weidner said the system is not being rigged, as the environmentalists suggest, only that BLM is engaging the states and counties in land use planning.

"Far from being a conspiracy with BLM, the counties are simply exercising their legitimate roles," he said. "The commissioners in Utah want their counties to play the appropriate role in economic development. We have been trying to engage BLM and BLM, for the first time, has been willing to listen."

Steve Bloch, attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, said his group has also met with BLM officials to discuss the land use plans. The difference, he said, was that counties were promised they would be given what they want from plans that are still being crafted.

The memo comes on the heels of a ruling last week by U.S. District Judge Dale Kimball that the BLM had wrongly taken shortcuts to get around environmental laws and speed oil and gas production on 16 potential wilderness areas.

The federal court ruling struck down a BLM lease sale in 2003, following an agreement by former Interior Secretary Gale Norton and then-Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt that froze the wilderness acreage in the state at 3.2 million, dropping consideration of additional areas identified by the Clinton-era BLM and some 6 million acres advocated by environmentalists.

Specifically, Weidner's memo said Bisson and Hughes would work to move through resource management plans for the Price, Vernal and Richfield regions, which will lay out a blueprint for land use during the next two decades.

"We as counties owe it [to] each other to strike while the iron is hot in finalizing these RMPs [resource management plans]," Weidner wrote. "Working with the new State BLM Director and the state to 'fix' these RMPs is an opportunity which may never come again!"

Excerpts from lobbyist's memo

The following are excerpts from the memo from Robert Weidner, lobbyist for counties, on July 25, 2006

* . . . The primary topic in Vernal was how to complete the outstanding Resource Management Plans (RMPs) across the state while President Bush's Administration remains in office with a cooperative attitude. We focused on the Vernal, Price and Richfield RMPs but discussed an array of related issues which act as impediments to economic growth. On behalf of BLM, Jim Hughes, Deputy Director from Washington, D.C., and Henry Bisson announced several significant changes which will promote economic growth and reduce restrictions on access to the public lands.

* . . . This is the first time in 28 years that I have seen the State, the counties and the BLM all on the same page with respect to resource development. We as counties owe it to each other to strike while the iron is hot. . . .

* . . . When was the last time a BLM State Director asked counties to join him in defining the benefits of oil & gas development in Utah in order to get the truth out? . . .