

November 24, 2009

EDITORIAL

No 'No More Wilderness'

In 2003, Gale Norton, then the secretary of the interior, and Michael Leavitt, then the governor of Utah, struck a deal that removed federal protections from about 2.6 million acres of public land in Utah that the Clinton administration had designated as potential wilderness. At the same time, Ms. Norton disavowed her department's longstanding authority to identify, study and recommend new areas for wilderness protection.

This "no more wilderness" policy, as it came to be known, exposed huge swaths of federal land throughout the Rocky Mountain West to oil and gas drilling and other commercial uses.

President Obama's interior secretary, Ken Salazar, has reversed many of the Bush administration's damaging environmental policies. Maddeningly, however, the "no more wilderness" policy is still in place. It is past time for Mr. Salazar to renounce it.

Representative Maurice Hinchey, a Democrat from upstate New York, and 89 other House members have written to Mr. Salazar urging him to reject the Norton-Leavitt arrangement — a back-room deal with no standing in law — and restore interim protections for the land in Utah until Congress can decide whether to protect the area permanently. (Mr. Hinchey has introduced a bill — the Red Rock Wilderness Act — that would confer wilderness protections on those acres, plus about 7 million more.)

More broadly, they want Mr. Salazar to reject the destructive philosophy underlying the Norton-Leavitt arrangement by reasserting the interior secretary's responsibility to help protect America's fragile landscapes from oil and gas leasing, off-road vehicle use and mining.

Under the law, only Congress can designate permanent wilderness — areas where all commercial activity is prohibited. But Congress also authorized the Interior Department to periodically inventory federal lands to identify those with "wilderness characteristics" and to give them interim protections until Congress can make the final decision. These areas are known as wilderness study areas.

It is this authority that Ms. Norton said she did not want and that Mr. Salazar should promptly reclaim.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)