

Equal treatment

Feds must foil OHV lawbreakers

Salt Lake Tribune Editorial

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After a Utah man disrupted a federal oil and gas lease sale and was slapped with a two-count felony indictment, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar warned that he wouldn't brook any such conduct in future.

We agreed with him that lawbreaking as an act of conscience or civil disobedience is still lawbreaking, and should be treated as such by federal land managers. And without regard to who is pushing what land-use agenda, be they monkey-wrenching conservationists, anti-government hotheads and/or all-terrain-vehicle scofflaws.

Comes now the acid test.

We're about to learn if Salazar's tough stance on University of Utah student Tim DeChristopher's bogus bidding on federal leases was so much posturing, or if he meant what he said about grabbing by the scruff anyone who flouts federal land-management laws.

A passel of Jeep and ATV owners are putting Salazar to the test by revving up for a Saturday show of contempt for laws protecting an off-limits riverbed in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. And to give a thumb in the eye to conservation organizations that have taken the feds to court over issues of land use and abuse.

Representatives of some 500 to 1,000 off-road enthusiasts vow they'll motor through the Paria-Hackberry wilderness study area as they splash up the Paria River near the Utah-Arizona border. The river is judged by the Bureau of Land Management to have wild and scenic qualities.

Salazar is in this fix largely due to the BLM's wink-and-nod attitude toward the many violators of the Paria River restrictions, which were in place well before George W. Bush took office. Nor did Salazar have anything to do with a U.S. attorney's failure some years ago to prosecute Kane County Commissioner Mark Habbeshaw for removing BLM signs closing motorized access to contested roads and trails in the monument. Habbeshaw is firing up the locals for Saturday's caravan.

Nine years of lax enforcement, combined with the Utah BLM's rigged and rushed-through management plans for the state's six regions, have emboldened rural Utahns who have long resented federal land ownership.

Salazar can be faulted for not having bounced Selma Sierra from her post as Utah BLM director. Sierra, a drill-baby-drill acolyte of the previous administration, has run roughshod over the landscapes she is sworn to protect.

Salazar should send her packing, just as soon as he figures out what to do about the uprising down on the border.