

US government unveils final Utah monument plan

August 23 2019, by Brady Mccombs



This July 9, 2017 file photo, shows a view of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah. The U.S. government's final management plan for lands in and around the Utah national monument that President Donald Trump downsized is light on new protections for the cliffs, canyons, waterfalls and arches found there, but it does include a few more safeguards than were in a proposal last year. A summary the Bureau of Land Management provided to The Associated Press shows that the plan for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southwestern Utah codifies that the lands cut out of the monument will be

open to mineral extraction such as oil, gas and coal as expected. (Spenser Heaps/The Deseret News via AP, File)

The U.S. government's final management plan for land in and around a Utah national monument that President Donald Trump downsized doesn't include many new protections for the cliffs, canyons, waterfalls and arches found there, but it does include a few more safeguards than were in a proposal issued last year.

The Bureau of Land Management's plan for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southwestern Utah codifies that the lands cut out of the monument will be open to mineral extraction such as oil, gas and coal as expected, according to a plan the agency provided to The Associated Press.

The agency chose an option that doesn't add any areas of critical environmental concern, increases lands open to cattle grazing and could raise the potential for "adverse effects" on lands and resources in the monument, the document shows.

At the same time, the agency tweaked the plan last year to call for new recreation management plans to address impacts on several highly visited areas, opens fewer acres to ATVs and nixes a plan that would have allowed people to collect some non-dinosaur fossils in certain areas inside the monument.

The agency also determined that no land will be sold from the 1,345 square miles (3,488 square kilometers) cut from the monument. Last year, Interior Department leaders rescinded a plan to sell 2.5 square miles (6.5 square kilometers) of that land after it was included in the draft management proposal and drew backlash from environmentalists.

Conservation and paleontology groups vehemently opposed the downsizing of the monument and have lawsuits pending challenging the move. Those groups criticized the plan's lack of land protections and consider the plan a waste of taxpayer resources, saying the government should not have acted until the lawsuits are resolved.

Harry Barber, Grand Staircase's acting manager, said in an interview with the AP that the plan reflects changes made after considering input from the public, an assessment that enough protections are in place already, and the voices of all different groups who use the lands. Monument visitation has increased 63% over the last decade with 1.1 million visitors in from October 2017 through September 2018, according to U.S. government figures.

"There are people who graze livestock, people that like to hunt, people that like to hike, people that like to trail run," said Barber, who has worked at the monument since it was created. "We're trying to be fair."

He pushed back against the notion that the lands now outside the monument will be left abandoned, saying the lands are still subject to rules and polices like all federally managed land.

Interest in oil, gas and coal has been limited so far and no project has been approved, Barber said. The lands are home to a major coal reserve but there's little market demand.



This May 30, 1997, file photo, shows the varied terrain of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument near Boulder, Utah. The U.S. government's final management plan for lands in and around the Utah national monument that President Donald Trump downsized doesn't include many new protections for the cliffs, canyons, waterfalls and arches found there, but it does include a few more safeguards than were in a proposal issued last year. The Bureau of Land Management's plan for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southwestern Utah codifies that the lands cut out of the monument will be open to mineral extraction such as oil, gas and coal as expected, according to a plan summary the agency provided to The Associated Press. (AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac, File)

"It's not a free-for-all," Barber said. "That seems to be what I hear a lot, people feeling like now anybody can go out and do anything they want to do on these lands. But, they need to realize that we still have our rules and policies."

But to Steve Bloch, legal director at the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance conservation group, it's unforgivable to cut the monument in half and downgrade the excluded lands into what he calls "garden variety public lands."

"Grand Staircase-Escalante is one of the nation's public land crown jewels and from the outset the Trump administration was hell-bent on destroying this place," Bloch said.

President Bill Clinton created the monument in 1996 using the Antiquities Act, which sets guidelines calling for the "smallest area compatible with proper care and management of the objects to be protected."

In 2017, Trump shrunk the monument from nearly 3,000 square miles (7,770 square kilometers) to 1,569 square miles (4,064 square kilometers) after a review of 27 national monuments by then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke. Trump downsized the Bears Ears National Monument, created by President Barack Obama in 2016, by about 85%.

Trump said scaling back the two monuments reversed federal overreach and earned cheers from Republican leaders in Utah who lobbied him to undo protections by Democratic presidents that they considered overly broad.

Conservation groups have called Trump's decision as the largest elimination of protected land in American history and believe they will prevail in their legal challenge.

Past presidents have trimmed national monuments 18 times, but there's never been a court ruling on whether the Antiquities Act also lets them reduce one.

David Polly, a paleontologist at Indiana University and past president of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, said he's relieved no fossil collection will be allowed inside the monument but worries that allowing people to take non-dinosaur fossils in many areas of the lands cut could lead to problems. The fossils in the area are rare because it's an ancient river bed and not an ocean bed and some items like petrified wood can be hard to distinguish from a dinosaur bone.

"It may be accidentally encouraging people to end up breaking the rules," Polly said.

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Citation: US government unveils final Utah monument plan (2019, August 23) retrieved 26 June

2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-issues-utah-monument.html>

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