



Utah

Obama settles monumental debate in Utah

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SALT LAKE CITY — Over the outcry of the state's elected officials and opposition by San Juan County leaders, President Barack Obama declared a Bears Ears National Monument for Utah on Wednesday, much to the celebratory relief of monument backers.

The action was immediately condemned by Utah's top political leaders.

"With this astonishing and egregious abuse of executive power, President Obama has shown that far-left special interest groups matter more to him than the people who have lived on and cared for Utah's lands for generations," said Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah. "For Utahns in general, and for those in San Juan County in particular, this is an affront of epic proportions and an attack on an entire way of life."

All three San Juan County commissioners said the county was in mourning.

"The push for a monument did not originate from those most impacted by this decision. Instead, it came from outside special interest groups who used deception and collusion to drown out local voices," a statement from the commission said.

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EXTRA CONTENT: Utah leaders decry monument designation

Supporters, however, were ecstatic.

"We are just elated we have this amount of land being designated," President Russell Begaye of the Navajo Nation said during a White House teleconference held an hour before the official announcement.

The monument footprint is 1.35 million acres — smaller than the 1.9 million acres the tribes sought — but sufficient enough to protect the most critical areas, Begaye added.

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Obama was answering the call of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, a group of Native American leaders from five tribes that banded together in a meeting at Bears Ears in July 2015.

Alfred Lomahquahu, vice chairman of the Hopi Tribe and co-chairman of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, called Wednesday's designation a victory not only for Native Americans, but all people.

"Our connection with this land is deeply tied to our identities, traditional knowledge, histories and cultures. We look forward to working with the current and future administrations to fully and properly administer these lands for all to enjoy," he said.

Christy Goldfuss, managing director of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said the designation comes with a first-of-its-kind tribal commission with elected leaders from each of the five Native American tribes who will serve as commission members.

Begaye added that the commission will bring a new "paradigm" to Native American relations with the federal government and allow tribes to have a greater say in management of the lands they hold sacred.

Beyond elevated management responsibilities, Begaye said it's important that tribes be guaranteed continued access for important activities like wood gathering and collecting of herbs — which Goldfuss said will be central to a land management plan that will be crafted and implemented.

The region in the southeast corner of Utah is viewed as a sacred area to the tribes, boasting more than 100,000 cultural relics. It is also home to world-renowned rock climbing, potash deposits, uranium and potential oil and gas development.

Any new oil and gas development is now off-limits, as is any new mining, Goldfuss added. The designation also locks up 100,000 acres of school trust lands, precluding any revenue generation from those parcels such as mineral extraction and setting the stage for a possible protracted land trade between the school trust lands administration and federal government.

Over the years, those on both sides of the monument debate agreed the remote and rugged region needed additional protection, but how that protection took form fostered vehement disputes.

Supporters said the only possible way to protect the thousands of cultural artifacts was through a monument designation — the region has only one ranger — but critics panned the idea, saying new monuments don't necessarily come with new money.

Goldfuss said both monuments designated Wednesday — Obama also created Gold Butte in Nevada covering 300,000 acres — were sought by a wide collection of groups and were at the heart of legislative proposals.

Observers say it was the failure of a massive public lands bill to move forward in Utah that prompted Obama to act in the waning days of his administration.

While Goldfuss said the Public Lands Initiative's sponsors, Reps. Rob Bishop and Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, worked hard on the measure, the designation ensures the Utah land will be protected where legislation has failed.

Chaffetz, however, called the designation a "slap in the face to the people of Utah," ignoring the progress made on settling land-use disputes through the initiative.

"After years of painstaking negotiations with a diverse coalition, Utah had a comprehensive, bipartisan solution on the table that would have protected the Bears Ears and provided a balanced solution," he said. "Instead, the president's midnight

monument cherry-picked provisions of the Public Lands Initiative and disregarded the economic development and multiuse provisions necessary for a balanced compromise."

The public lands bill proposed twin national conservation areas for the region covering 1.4 million acres that Bishop and Chaffetz argued would provide access yet offer greater protections than traditionally managed federal lands.

Critics of the measure said the bill didn't go far enough and that it was horrible for wilderness. They added that in the Bears Ears region, the conservation areas failed to include key archaeological areas such as Allen Canyon and Chippean Ridge, and also allowed the school trust lands administration to retain mineral rights on a large block of land north of Bluff.

Supporters say the designation will also preserve lands treasured for their recreation value.

"Southeastern Utah is one of the most revered outdoor recreation destinations in the United States, if not the world. It is an iconic destination for climbers, mountain bikers, paddlers and many other outdoor recreationists. We are thrilled this region is receiving permanent protection as a national monument," said Adam Cramer of the Outdoor Alliance.

The move was also praised by environmental groups.

"We applaud the president's decision and congratulate the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition for this historic protection of their ancestral homeland," said Scott Groene, executive director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "The monument will long benefit Utahns and Americans. It is the product of years of public discussion where all agreed this landscape is worthy of permanent protection."

But in Utah, where two-thirds of the land is already owned by the federal government, foes say the designation will decimate a way of life in San Juan County and further stoke antagonism and distrust between locals and federal agencies.

Over the past couple of years, the dispute has also divided many in the Native American community. Accusations that out-of-state tribal leaders have been hijacked by the environmental movement are steeped deep in the debate on the monument campaign, which was fueled in part by \$20 million in grants from two California foundations.

The fight over Bears Ears blossomed into an intense lobbying effort by both sides in the nation's capital, and Interior Secretary Sally Jewell visited Utah in July.

Jewell admitted she was shocked at the lack of protections for Native American cultural sites, but repeatedly stressed no designation would come without local consultation.

A "listening" session in Bluff drew more than 1,500 people, but Utah's elected leaders said their pleas of no "midnight monument" obviously were not heard.

"This decision ignores the will of the majority of Utahns. It disregards the desire of Native American groups who count these lands as their heritage to co-manage this culturally important area. It overlooks the unanimous opposition of Utah's statewide elected officials and Utah's entire congressional delegation," Gov. Gary Herbert said in a prepared statement, adding that federal overreach often disregards the well-being of rural America.

Obama been busy this month in a flurry of last-minute actions initiated by the executive branch, including a ban on offshore oil and gas drilling in the Arctic and Atlantic oceans off Canada and the United States, and the finalization of a stream protection rule that GOP critics say is another assault on the coal industry.

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