

The Utah Public Lands Initiative

By Rep. Rob Bishop

Utahns value their public lands. The state is blessed with unparalleled landscapes, recreational opportunities, and an abundance of natural resources. These lands support a range of uses, including recreation, wildlife habitat, ranching, and resource development. Unfortunately, over the years, the management of public lands in Utah has been the subject of much contention and conflict and interested parties have failed to reach consensus or compromise. Much of the debate has centered on the idea that multiple-use and land conservation is an either/or proposition. I flatly reject this notion. Conservation and multiple-use can coexist.

For decades, unsettled land-use designations, such as wilderness study areas, have fueled distrust and acrimony. The uncertainty about the future of these lands created conflict amongst those favoring differing types of uses. The diverse uses of public lands have an important role in making Utah healthy, viable, and inviting. The future of the state depends on a responsible balance of both conservation and development.

The federal government's interest in the expansion of the federal estate has also fueled distrust. Utahns are more than aware of the federal government's influence over the state, after all, more than 65% of the state consists of federal lands. It has been nearly 120 years since Utah became a state and some of its landholdings, the school trust lands, still exist as a checkerboard pattern of small and isolated sections that are surrounded by large swaths of federal lands. The state is unable to effectively manage these areas or utilize them to their full potential for the benefit of the school trust, for which the lands were set aside in the first place. Presence of these isolated parcels also conflicts with those that support more uniform and unencumbered land designations.

I have observed and participated in the debate over the management of public lands for more than two decades. For the first time, I am seeing the paradigm shift toward a more reasonable, balanced use of public lands in Utah. There appears to be a growing consensus amongst county and state leaders, conservation groups, industry, non-governmental organizations, and the public, that Utah is ready to move away from the standard gridlock of the past and toward a sensible resolution. This begins with a reassessment of land management and ownership patterns in Utah.

Working toward striking a real balance between conservation and responsible development, and to establish greater certainty about the way our public lands may be used, I have proposed the Public Lands Initiative in Utah. This will include participation from a range of stakeholders including our county partners, state and federal leaders, conservation groups, industry, non-governmental organizations, and the public. Together we will work toward developing policies that seek to address many of the issues that have prevented consensus about public lands management in the past.

The benefits of both land conservation and multiple-use are well-known. I don't expect this process to be easy but I'm hopeful that we will be able to come together to do what's right for the state of Utah and for future generations of public land users.