

The Salt Lake Tribune

Feds 'strongly' oppose Chaffetz bill to sell public lands

By Thomas Burr

The Salt Lake Tribune

Published: October 25, 2011 12:20PM

Updated: October 25, 2011 03:41PM

Washington • The Interior Department said Tuesday it “strongly” opposes a measure by Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, to sell off some 3.3 million acres of public lands to help pay down the national debt.

Such a move “would be costly, harmful to local economies and communities and undermine important resource values,” Michael Pool, deputy director of the Bureau of Land Management told a House Natural Resources subcommittee hearing Chaffetz’s legislation. “It would also be unlikely to generate significant revenues to the U.S. treasury.”

Chaffetz, citing a 14-year-old study ordered up by Congress in the Clinton administration, says there has not been enough movement to dispose of excess federal lands and noted that the current system — by which some parcels are sold and the money used to buy up other parcels — is broken.

Moreover, the congressman added, “management of surplus lands is more expensive and pulls resources from lands that are more deserving of management.”

Chaffetz’s plan would order the BLM to auction off the acreage in several Western states, including some 132,000 acres in Utah. According to estimates from Chaffetz’s office, the Utah parcels would reap about \$16 million toward paying down the nation’s \$7 trillion debt.

The Natural Resources subcommittee over public lands did not vote on the legislation Tuesday, though committee members heard a variety of input on the idea of selling off public acres.

Mark Ward, a policy analyst for the Utah Association of Counties, said there was an “ecological time bomb” in the West because federal land managers have left public acres in “poor condition.”

Besides, he argued, when federal ownership outweighs private ownership, communities and schools feel the brunt of decreased taxes.

“A reasonable and well thought out program to dispose of excess federal lands in the West is desperately needed to counterbalance the grossly unfair and stacked deck against Western states,” Ward testified before the committee.

Erica Rosenberg, president of the Seattle-based Western Lands Project, said Chaffetz’s bill would trump a well-established program that allows the BLM to sell excess land by going through a public process that ensures a say for communities and adjacent landowners.

Selling off lands identified in a 1997 report would harm taxpayers that value and use the public lands, Rosenberg said.

tburr@sltrib.com

© 2011 The Salt Lake Tribune