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Deseret News- Opinion: Gary Herbert: 5 myths about Bears Ears

Governor Gary Herbert

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The extraordinarily vast and beautiful area of southeastern Utah known to many as the Bears Ears region deserves protection for the benefit of all Americans for generations to come and for the special benefit of those Native Americans with rich ancestral ties to this land. In order to conserve these geologically, culturally and archaeologically rich lands, federal, state, tribal and local officials need to convene and craft legislation for a diverse array of special protections and responsible recreational uses. President Donald Trump's announcement Monday reopens the door for exactly the kind of sustainable management that the Bears Ears region needs.

By executive order, Trump has reduced the Bears Ears National Monument (BENM) that President Barack Obama designated less than one year ago. That original designation created a supersize monument of about 1.35 million acres of federal land, which, when one accounts for all state and private inholdings, actually approaches 1.5 million acres. The entire state of Delaware is a little over 1.59 million acres. Both the creation and the reduction of this monument have come with controversy — controversy that has often been fueled by several false narratives.

Regardless of your heartfelt feelings about what Bears Ears National Monument represents, let's sift the facts from the fiction.

Myth: By reducing the size of BENM, these federal lands will be transferred to the state of Utah and/or private entities.

Fact: BENM was designated on federal lands that will remain under federal ownership regardless of monument status. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has adamantly opposed the wholesale transfer or privatization of federal public lands, and that commitment is reflected in this modification of monument boundaries.

Myth: Without national monument status, the vast landscape of the Bears Ears region will be subjected to unchecked exploitation.

Fact: Before Obama's monument declaration in December 2016, the Bears Ears region was mostly federal public land subject to a network of federal protections that conserve the area's natural beauty and archeological treasures. Trump's reconfiguration of the monument's boundaries does not change the federal ownership of these lands and maintains the existing system of federal protections.

Specifically, 11 "wilderness study areas" in the Bears Ears region prohibit most motorized

travel, construction of new roads and development of oil, gas or coal. These wilderness study areas include many of the region's iconic locations: Cedar Mesa, Mancos Mesa and Cheese Box Canyon, to name a few. The region is also home to the Dark Canyon Wilderness, designated by Congress in 1984 and completely protected from motorized travel or natural resource extraction. Farther south lies the famed Valley of the Gods, federally preserved as an "area of critical environmental concern" to ensure the integrity of beautiful scenic vistas.

Myth: Without national monument status, the Bears Ears region will be crisscrossed by coal mines, oil rigs and gas pipelines.

Fact: Mineral resources beneath Bears Ears are scarce. There is no developable oil and gas. The region's nonrenewable resources, including uranium near the Daneros Mine, were actually outside the expansive monument boundaries declared by Obama. The integrity of the Bears Ears landscape, long kept intact before the creation of the monument, will almost certainly remain intact after Trump's announcement. And to ensure this going forward, the state of Utah is asking for congressional legislation that will exclude the region from mineral extraction.

Myth: National monument status will protect the rich archaeological sites and artifacts in the Bears Ears region.

Fact: Looting and vandalism are ongoing problems because the region lacks sufficient federal law enforcement. Existing federal laws such as the Archaeological Resources Protection Act and the Paleontological Resources Preservation Act are just two federal laws that protect precious cultural and scientific sites on federal land regardless of status. But the Bureau of Land Management's law enforcement presence, once a formidable force in the area, has steadily declined due to federal budget constraints and workforce reductions. The designation of BENM brings no guarantees of improved law enforcement, but it does guarantee growing tourist visitation to vulnerable archaeological sites that will spread BLM resources even thinner and likely aggravate problems with looting and vandalism.

Myth: National monument status is a boon for outdoor recreation.

Fact: Monument status can limit specific activities enjoyed by outdoor recreationists, such as mountain biking, certain types of rock climbing and motorized travel on back roads. Managing public lands for the full spectrum of outdoor recreation activities and tailoring them to the specific terrain is best done through land management plans that take input from local tribal leaders and local land managers who understand the unique nature of the area and its possible uses for responsible recreation.

Strong protections for the federal public lands that Utahns know and love are in place. The sacred and precious antiquities of southern Utah continue to be protected through targeted use of the Antiquities Act and existing laws, regulations and land management plans. Long-term, meaningful protection depends on stronger enforcement of existing law and on new legislation tailored to the nuanced concerns of federal, state, tribal and local stakeholders. It depends on allowing meaningful co-management of tribal ancestral lands by our local tribes. It depends on smart, sustainable management to accommodate conservation alongside a variety of responsible

uses. By reducing the BENM to a realistic and manageable size, the Trump administration has reopened the door for the kind of sustainable protection the Bears Ears region really needs.

Gary R. Herbert is the governor of Utah.

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