

# Program preserves Western lands

## Secretary Babbitt: Millions of acres to be open 'forever'

Statesman wire services

DENVER — Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt on Thursday unveiled a new program aimed at preserving up to 4 million acres of open space across the West, part of the Clinton administration's plan to protect more federal land before leaving office.

The new system will be called the National Landscape Monuments. Babbitt said the new monuments won't be set up for large numbers of visitors. In fact, they will have no visitor centers at all in many cases.

With the West becoming more urban, Babbitt said the country needs to do more than just "see an Indian ruin and make a park or monument on 40 acres."

"It's about a landscape," Bab-



Bruce Babbitt  
Secretary  
of the Interior

bitt said. "The people in Chicago and their children are going to live in a big city but know that there is open space forever that belongs to them whether they come and visit or not."

Reflecting that goal, the land will not be run by the National Park Service but by the Bureau of Land

Management — which oversees logging, mining, grazing and recreation on hundreds of millions of acres of land.

The BLM's territory isn't considered as glamorous or distinctive as what the Park Service is entrusted with, and Babbitt has often battled with the BLM over what he considers its promoting and logging policies. Babbitt said he wants to give the agency a new role in preservation.

"The nation's largest land management agency ought to be induced to have a sense of pride," Babbitt said.

Tina Arapkiles, the Sierra Club's southwest regional representative, praised the an-

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nouncement, saying it would shift the BLM from its traditional mining and logging mindset. "He's trying to protect land for the future. And the land that has been traditionally managed by the BLM has been viewed in our country's history as giveaway land or trash land. It's not worth anything but having cows or mines," she said.

The land being considered for landscape monument status is already owned by the federal government, though some holdings might be purchased as well. Some of the sites under consideration are:

- In Oregon, Steens Mountain and Soda Mountain.
- In Colorado, Canyon of the Ancients, an expansion of the Colorado National Monument and enlarging the Sand Dunes National Monument.
- In California, the Santa Rosa Mountains near Palm Springs and Carrizo Plain in the San Joaquin Valley near Santa Barbara.
- In Arizona, the Empire Ranch near Tucson.
- In Montana, an area along the Missouri River.

On Babbitt's working list of potential landscape monuments are sensitive archaeological areas near, but not within, southwestern Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park, which preserves cliff dwellings of early native peoples. Several other sites, in seven states, already are designated National Conservation Areas, a similar protective status for sensitive bureau lands. Among them: Red Rocks outside of Las Vegas, El Malpais National Monument west of Albuquerque; the 12-million-acre California Desert area; the Snake River Birds of Prey site in Idaho; and the Gunnison River Gorge in Colorado.

"Some of the property I am personally familiar with that he is looking at deserves the protection of monument status irrespective of the agency that manages it," said Tom Kiernan of the National Parks Conservation Association in Washington, D.C.

"I do have a fundamental concern that BLM doesn't now have the management policies and staffing and culture to manage these more sensitive lands. It is going to require scientific skills and staffing," Kiernan said.

Babbitt said there will have to be changes in the internal workings of the BLM as a result of the new system.

Babbitt said he hoped Congress will act on his suggestions, but President Clinton could declare the land monuments by proclamation. In 1996 for instance, Clinton declared Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante as a national monument over local protests.

The controversial preservation method is the use of the Antiquities Act of 1906, which authorizes the president, acting alone, to create national monuments of any "historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest."

Public recreation, including hunting and camping, wouldn't change much. Mining most likely would be barred as "incompatible" — most of the sites aren't likely to be mining areas anyway. Babbitt said livestock grazing would be reviewed case by case.

The proposal is sure to arouse opposition from Western members of Congress who already oppose the Clinton administration's roadless-forests initiative. That effort, which is under study, could convert millions more acres of the national forests into areas that are off-limits to logging, mining and motorized recreation.

USAToday contributed information to this story.

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