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IDAHO STATESMAN-BOISE, ID

DATE: JUN 24 2000

Babbitt: Don't fear Craters expansion

Ranchers, hunters won't face drastic changes, he says

By Ken Miller
The Idaho Statesman

RUPERT — Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt Friday made his third and probably last Idaho trip before recommending a major expansion of Craters of the Moon National Monument, telling nervous ranchers and hunters they have little to fear from a bigger monument.

Babbitt, who has drawn fire across the West for his efforts to expand national monuments like Craters, said he expects to make a recommendation to President Clinton before winter on whether Craters of the Moon National Monument should be significantly expanded.

"This area has been the subject of discussion not so much in Boise, but out there for some time," Babbitt told Idaho States-



Tom Shanahan / The Idaho Statesman

man editors and reporters in a meeting before leaving for the Rupert meeting Friday morning. He said the current boundaries

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, in an editorial board meeting at The Idaho Statesman on Friday morning, covers a gamut of environmental topics crucial to Idahoans, from endangered species to adding the Great Rift area to the Craters of the Moon National Monument. Babbitt traveled to Rupert on Friday afternoon for more public comment on the Great Rift addition.

man editors and reporters in a meeting before leaving for the Rupert meeting Friday morning. He said the current boundaries

for the Craters of the Moon National Monument are "totally arbitrary" and made it clear he plans to recommend a major ex-

pansion of the monument while trying to deal with local concerns about grazing, hunting, off-road vehicles and other uses in the Craters area.

Babbitt is considering a recommendation to add to Craters another 700,000 acres of lava fields and adjacent grasslands along the 62-mile Great Rift, a crack in the earth from which lava spread across the Snake River Plain only 2,000 years ago. The lava fields and the rift are prized by geologists. Craters now includes 54,000 acres of land protected by the National Park Service.

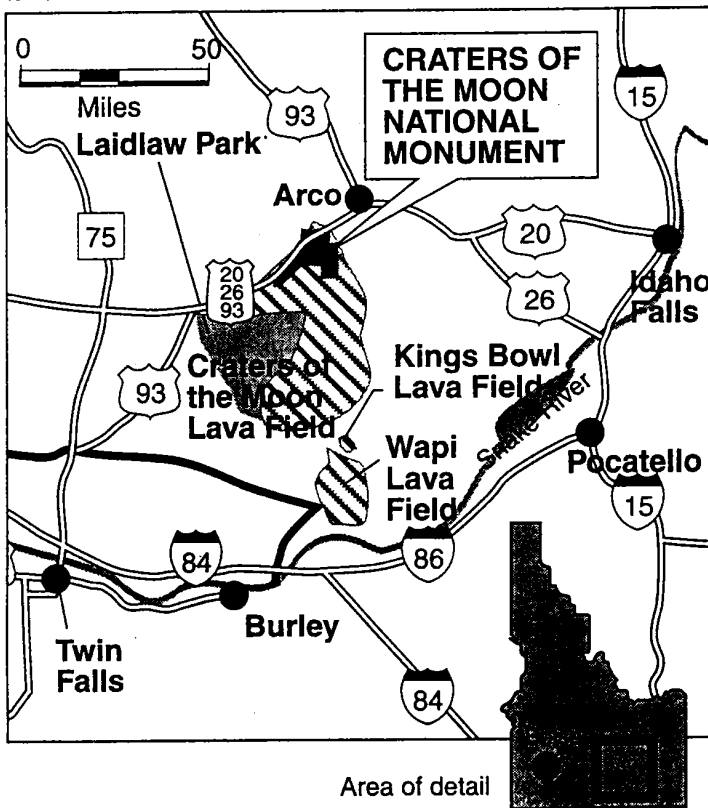
"There is no rift like this anywhere," Babbitt told a crowd of about 150 at East Minico Junior High School in Rupert. "It's like looking straight down into the center of the earth. This is an important step in protecting an important natural resource."

See Babbitt / 9A

► Babbitt answers questions from The Statesman, 9A

Babbitt proposal

Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt has proposed expanding Craters of the Moon National Monument to include two other lava fields and turning surrounding Bureau of Land Management land into a second Great Rift national monument.



BABBITT

From 1A

Criticized by the state's congressional delegation, the idea of the expansion has been well-received north of the current monument in towns like Arco that stand to gain an economic boost from added tourism.

On the flight from Boise to Rupert Friday, Babbitt predicted the reception there would be more chilly, since towns in the south probably won't gain the same economic benefits.

Ranchers in the southern end of the proposed monument expansion fear added protections will cut grazing access and reduce off-road vehicle use. "We run sheep out in the area he's talking about," said Rochelle Oxarango, who with her husband, Robert, met with Babbitt before the meeting began here.

"The area's worth protecting and has different values to different people," Robert Oxarango said. "We all agree on the need to protect it. It's how to protect it that's the question."

The Oxarangos said they're concerned that expanding the National Park Service's presence in the area through the monument designation will bring more stringent land-use rules than are in effect today.

Henry Etcheverry, of the Minidoka Grazing Association and newly appointed to the Idaho Sheep Commission, asked Babbitt whether the new designations would limit the amount of predator control on the historic grazing lands.

"We're suspicious of what the federal government may have in store for us as livestock people," Etcheverry said. Babbitt replied that the new monument rules would honor historic livestock practices.

Power County Commissioner Kent Rudeen said he was concerned about added costs to local law enforcement agencies as more tourists and other adventurers are attracted to the expanded national monument and need life-safety assistance. "There's no question this kind of designation will impose some kind of additional management costs," Babbitt told Rudeen. There will be a "discernable bump in visitation" and "an undeniable rise in expenses" to go with it.

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Babbitt said earlier in the day that Congress spent \$5 million this year to help cover such expenses in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, which he created in 1994, setting off a firestorm about the administration's use of the 1906 Antiquities Act to set aside federal lands as national monuments.

Not everyone here on Friday was opposed to the expanded monument.

"I'm just getting tired of people carping about the Clinton administration and you coming down and criticizing you for trying to protect it," said Jerry Jayne of the Idaho Environmental Council. "I commend you for this proposal, and I hope you recommend it to President Clinton."

Clark Collins, of the Pocatello-based BlueRibbon Coalition, which wants to protect the right to use off-road vehicles, disagreed and charged the Clinton administration with launching a major land grab. "I don't think there's a problem in that area," Collins said of Craters. "And I resent the implication that somehow or another off-highway vehicle recreation needs to be controlled in that area. Our concern is that our recreational interests will be overlooked. They have been overlooked so far."

Kelly Walton, a longtime Idaho conservative leader and critic of the Clinton administration, jumped in.

"I think we have a problem, and the problem is 'Bill knows best,'" Walton said. "The issue is, should locals control this or should Eastern liberals control this. To tell my sons they can't ride the desert on their ATVs is a form of tyranny." He said he believes the deed is done: "Bill Clinton has already scheduled it to pass," adding, "The reason we're here is to express our displeasure. I suggest we give Bill Clinton's legacy the Idaho version of one hell of a tea party."

As the audience broke into applause, Babbitt sought to assure residents that his plan won't bring dramatic reductions in hunting and grazing on BLM lands, although he acknowledged off-road vehicle use will be curtailed.

Former Gov. John Evans, who began working on expanding the Craters monument in 1988, praised Babbitt and the Clinton administration for bending over backward to listen to

Idahoans' views. "He could have done this out of Washington, D.C., but he didn't do that," Evans said as he turned toward Babbitt and said: "I'm a strong supporter of what you're putting together here."

As for when he'll make his recommendation, Babbitt said he couldn't say. But he did say Idahoans won't be caught off guard. "It's possible that the

president will turn to me at some function or something and say, 'Stop, I don't want to hear from you anymore about this,'" Babbitt said. "But absent some large intervening fact, I am inclined to try to wrap this up."

Contact Ken at 377-6402 or kmiller@boise.gannett.com