

Touting conservation areas

Dedication ceremony speakers say lands bill is model for rest of nation

By David DeMille

ddemille@thespectrum.com

IVINS — For one day at least, the normally contentious struggles over Southern Utah's public lands made way for smiles, handshakes and cooperation during the dedication of two national conservation areas in Washington County.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar joined a group of dignitaries at Tuacahn Amphitheater in Ivins to dedicate the Red Cliffs and Beaver Dam Wash national conservation areas — two separate areas that make up about 108,000 acres of Washington County's most scenic landscapes and valuable cultural sites and were approved as part of the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act in 2009.

Speakers from all sides of the political spectrum touted the event as a triumph of collaboration and an example that Americans are capable of meaningful agreements when it comes to public lands.

Salazar said he is working with representatives from other counties in Utah and across the United States to develop similar conservation areas, and many are looking at Washington County as the model.

"They're doing what you have done here at the Red Cliffs and Beaver Dam Wash conservation areas," he said. "It's local communities coming together and saying this is something represents a way of life we want to preserve."

Former Republican Sen. Bob Bennett, who said he spent a decade working on the bill before it passed, pointed out that it was a unique case of unlikely partners coming to an agreement. He and Democratic Rep. Jim Matheson, Democrats and Republicans, environmentalists and business owners all came together to find a compromise, Bennett said, emphasizing that he hopes to see similar agreements drive public lands legislation everywhere, rather than partisan divides.

"The process is still alive," he said. "We're still going to get it done. Washington County is now the shining example that everyone in the country is looking at."

More than 100 residents were on hand for the event, which also featured comments from Bureau of Land Management Director Bob Abbey, Washington County Commissioner Alan Gardner, Southern Paiute Tribal Elder Glenn Rogers and representatives from some of Southern Utah's advocates for public lands protection.

"We are preserving some of the scenic landscapes that Washington County is famous for that draws countless visitors and events just like this past weekend's (St. George Ironman) to our area," said Christi Nuffer, administrator for Citizens for Dixie's Future.

Local officials are still working on the implementation of the Washington County lands bill, connecting and creating trails, rehabilitating species and trying to communicate any changes to the public, said National Parks Service Manager Dawna Ferris-Rowley.

There are still some items under contention, such as about 1,700 acres of private land that is locked within the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area, Commissioner Gardner said and Republicans in the state are hopeful

that recent legislation enacted at the state level might someday transfer federal lands in Utah back to the state. Still, regardless of who the stakeholders are, Gardner said he hopes future changes are negotiated with local input, as was the case with the Washington County lands bill.

“One of our goals is to keep the county involved in the decision making,” he said. “That’s going to be critical that we’re able to get a seat at the table.”

The Beaver Dam Wash National Conservation Area includes 63,500 acres in the southwest corner of Washington County, bordering the state lines of Arizona and Nevada. The Red Cliffs NCA includes 45,000 acres in the central part of the county, south of Pine Valley Mountain and ringed on the other three sides by most of the county’s communities.