

Bishop has quiver of pointless arrows

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Southern Utah Voices

Rep. Rob Bishop encouraged the Utah Legislature to pass legislation demanding that the federal government hand over title of most federal lands in Utah to state control. He asked for "a quiver of legislative arrows that send a message to the federal government." One will hit, he hopes.

Bishop's argument suggests that federal ownership of public lands limits the state's ability to generate revenues for schools. And Bishop excitedly points to an impending paradigm shift to suggest that a national drive for energy independence may help Easterners see the light when it comes to the development of natural resources including oil and natural gas on these lands.

Yet the Bureau of Land Management, which controls most of the lands in question, is already well equipped to lease land for resource extraction where doing so makes economic sense. The BLM has a multiple-use mandate that encourages the agency to make these resources available to private exploitation for public benefit. The state of Utah, on the other hand, doesn't have this same ability.

The BLM's multiple-use mandate requires that the agency look at the best use of particular parcels. If an area is attractive to hikers or climbers and would benefit a local economy by attracting tourists, then it's not likely that BLM is going to lease it for oil rigs. The BLM has to assess other uses as well, such as wildlife habitat. So the resource development that Bishop hopes for is already underway, though it is the federal treasury that receives the income from sales.

What's interesting when we speak of paradigms is how Rep. Bishop and the elected leadership in Utah fail to grasp the economic value of these vast open spaces. They view open space as wasted space. Yet those same Easterners that Bishop hopes to appeal to with "drill, baby, drill" visit Utah to experience the open space that they lack back home. In 2010, 20.2 million domestic and international visitors traveled to Utah, spending an estimated \$6.5 billion. Tourism supported almost 123,000 jobs and generated \$842 million in state and local tax revenues, according to the Utah Office of Tourism, Governor's Office of Economic Development.

Energy independence is an important goal, but that doesn't mean a continued reliance on old ways. The impending paradigm shift means that we have to transition to new forms of energy in wind and solar and decrease reliance on oil by increasing automobile fuel economy, among other actions.

We also need a paradigm shift here in Utah. We need our leadership to embrace a future of possibility that recognizes the value of healthy landscapes. Resource extraction is a part of that future but so is capitalizing on Utah's beauty and wild lands. At Bishop's prodding, the Legislature passed and the governor signed legislation demanding that the federal government hand over these lands. But this legislation is both unconstitutional and has no chance of ever happening.

Rep. Bishop got his quiver of arrows from the Legislature, but they miss the mark.

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