

The Salt Lake Tribune

COMMENTARY: By compromise or executive order, Greater Canyonlands needs protection

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By Jim Dabakis

Edward Abbey called Utah's Canyonlands area "the most weird, wonderful, magical place on earth — there is nothing else like it anywhere."

He was right. Two hundred and ninety million years in the making, this pristine land is the soul of America. Its solace and tranquility refresh those who come to its well. At 1.4 million acres, Greater Canyonlands (including Canyonlands National Park's 337,598 acres) is the largest roadless property in America outside of Alaska. It is a unique ecosystem unlike any other place on the planet.

Today, Greater Canyonlands is under attack and urgently needs protection. Frankly, I don't care how the safeguarding gets done. Perhaps Rep. Rob Bishop's lofty "[grand bargain](#)" will allow Utah to exchange state land for federal public land. Or maybe [President Obama will protect Greater Canyonlands](#) by invoking the Antiquities Act, making it a national monument just as President Theodore Roosevelt made the Grand Canyon a national monument 11 years before Congress got around to making it a national park.

Congressman Bishop, you have two years left with the Obama administration to gather input from Utahns and cooperatively protect Greater Canyonlands. Please, Mr. Bishop, work it out. But if that does not happen, I am one elected Utah official asking the president to act to protect this land.

Canyonlands must not be treated as some boom-and-bust town, exploited into oblivion until its resources are depleted, with the profiteers then moving on. This land needs sanctuary from the fossil-fuel and chemical extractors — industries that often think only of short-term profits.

According to a report by the Greater Canyonlands Coalition, there is either work being done or planned in Greater Canyonlands for oil and gas, tar sands and potash mining. The oil boom is already playing out at the entrance to the Island in the Sky district of Canyonlands National Park and Dead Horse Point State Park. Locals now dub it "oil land in the sky."

In the 200-square-mile "tar sands triangle" between the Colorado and Dirty Devil rivers, energy companies hold leases for tar sands strip mining on more than 90,000 acres. The leases are inside Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, border Canyonlands National Park and Bureau of Land Management wilderness study areas. In January 2013, Utah's Division of Oil, Gas and Mining gave final approval for a commercial tar sands strip mining operation (the first in the United States) in the raw, spontaneous nature of the Book Cliffs north of Moab.

Hatch Point is under pressure from potash developers. In the name of Utah schoolchildren, Utah's School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration approved five exploration wells, which have been drilled; the BLM has approved five more, which await drilling. If developed, the region would be crisscrossed with new roads, pipelines, a warehouse-sized "drying building" and new electric and gas infrastructure — all in what is now a designated BLM special recreation management area.

Additionally, the BLM has approved potash exploration above Labyrinth Canyon of the Green River, within Greater Canyonlands.

We are not going to lose Greater Canyonlands. We have already lost it for future generations. The people of the state must demand Canyonlands back — demand that it be protected. If the state won't protect this, the president must.

Whatever the future may hold in the generational battle over public lands in Utah, Greater Canyonlands ought not be held hostage in that war. Land so beautiful, so spectacular and so precious that all Utahns should demand now that our collective stewardship over this land be taken seriously. These 1.4 million acres are delicate; they must be protected, forever.

Jim Dabakis is a Democratic state senator representing District 2, and is a member of the Utah Commission for the Stewardship of Public Lands.

For more information about the letter, go to: www.greatercanyonlands.org/news/.

Read more: [By compromise or executive order, Greater Canyonlands needs protection](#)

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