

Editorials

- **BLM plan for Moab: Agency's notion of balance shorts protection**
- **Health-reform fix: Booting kids off CHIP bad for families, taxpayers**
- **Range tenants: Cattle and wildlife could benefit from program**
- **The Thumb**
- **A grimmer reaper: Prescription drugs take too many lives**
- **A taller Sandy: Growing skyward could shape Sandy's future**
- **Dont txt n drive: Texting while driving is risky business**
- **Bottoms-up: Utah liquor laws could be loosened**
- **EPA gagged: What does agency have to hide?**
- **Mining MSHA: Dysfunctional agency needs new director**

Commentaries

- **How should Obama go about responding to McCain's attacks?**
- **Friedman: Drilling in Greenland's ice reveals our climate's history**
- **Gen. McCaffrey is right: We can't shoot our way out of Afghanistan**
- **The big question heading toward November: Can the planet be saved?**
- **EITC: Another place the federal government can help**
- **Pitts: A question that speaks volumes about Bush and Co.**
- **Clarence Page: McCain vs. Obama ad wars heating up**
- **Blummer: The marriage of human thought and paper**
- **1988 fires in Yellowstone and the**

BLM plan for Moab: Agency's notion of balance shorts protection

Tribune Editorial

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Moab means many things to many Americans - Arches, Canyonlands, uranium, bicycles on the Slickrock Trail, four-wheeling, oil and gas wells, the Colorado River. So when the largest local landlord, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, tries to balance competing uses on 1.8 million of these extraordinary acres, it can't please everyone.

Finding that balance is what the BLM's Moab Field Office has tried to do in its new Resource Management Plan. We find that while it has made significant progress toward environmental protection, it could and should have done more.

Take off-highway vehicle use, for example. By one measure, the BLM's final proposal takes a huge stride toward protecting these fragile desert lands from being ground to dust. Compared to the current plan, created in 1985, it reduces the number of acres open to cross-country travel from 620,000 to 1,866. It would reduce the miles of designated routes from about 6,200 to about 3,700.

That *sounds* good. But even granting that the planning area is a huge chunk of real estate - it covers all of Grand County and the northern third of San Juan County - 3,700 miles is about 15 times the official highway mileage from Salt Lake City to Moab in designated OHV routes. That's a bunch too much.

Consider oil and gas leasing. The proposed plan would decrease production only slightly from the current plan, and would barely change projected state royalties and the number of wells. There would be big increases, however, in the numbers of acres on which drilling techniques which have a smaller environmental impact would be required. Sadly, given the Bush administration's drill-at-any-cost philosophy, the BLM proposal is about the best that could be hoped for.

Then there's the perennial elephant in the Utah public lands debate, wilderness. The proposal identifies three areas comprising about 48,000 acres that would be managed to protect and maintain wilderness characteristics. By comparison, a more environmentally friendly alternative the BLM considered, but rejected, included 33 areas comprising 266,000 acres. This illustrates how the BLM's view of balance clearly is not skewed toward wilderness, when, given rapid development in Utah and concern about the planet's declining health, it should be.

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- Five, not four
- Not organized crime
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