
Writers on the Range: We can help shape this Utah monument

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When President Joe Biden restored the original boundaries of both Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears national monuments in 2021, public-land lovers felt they had achieved a lasting victory.

Biden's action reversed the Trump administration's shrinkage of these protected areas in southern Utah, and once again put those spectacular canyons off-limits to mining and energy development. The victory was confirmed in August, when a federal court dismissed Utah's lawsuit attempting to overturn Biden's action.

But in some ways, the crucial work of preserving these places has just begun. The proclamations establishing and restoring the two national monuments are lofty documents that make the case for wielding the Antiquities Act to protect the landscapes in question. But the real test is always what happens on the ground.

We have a clearer picture of that now, because this August, the BLM released its draft resource management plan and environmental impact statement for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The public has until Nov. 9 to make its wishes known.

The local environmental community sees the agency's "preferred" alternative, which "emphasizes the protection and maintenance of intact and resilient landscapes ..." as a vast improvement over the status quo. Though it's less restrictive than one of the other four alternatives, this approach would significantly limit grazing, motorized vehicle use, and target shooting across the monument.

State and local politicians who subscribe to the Sagebrush Rebel ideology have been attempting to dismantle the national monument ever since then-President Bill Clinton established it in 1996. Neither Congress nor even the George W. Bush administration would accede to their demands, but over the years the monument has been starved of funds, lost valuable staff and its management has been influenced by the local culture, which is generally hostile to federal land management.

Then two decades after Grand Staircase-Escalante was established, Republican Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch convinced President Donald Trump to drastically shrink it. The legality of the move was questionable at best: The Antiquities Act gives the president the power to establish national monuments, but not to rescind or dismantle them. The Trump administration's management plan also gutted protections for what remained — especially relating to grazing.

The livestock industry has long claimed that the national monument's grazing rules would destroy local ranching. Yet Clinton's proclamation clearly stated that grazing would continue under the existing BLM

rules. In fact, the national monument helped a handful of ranchers who were ready to get out of the marginal business of running cows in inhospitable — yet beautiful and sensitive — terrain. The ranchers struck a deal to retire their grazing permits along the Escalante River and some of its tributaries in exchange for a generous cash payout from the nonprofit Grand Canyon Trust.

Even after the buyout, more than 95% of the monument remained open to livestock, and the number of cattle — or animal unit months — permitted on the monument is about the same now as it was in 1996. Today, though, fewer cattle run on nearly every permitted grazing allotment. It is clear that the livestock operators themselves are the ones limiting the number of cattle.

But here's the problem: Biden's restoration of the monument did not repeal the Trump-era plan that opened up retired grazing allotments. Now the public has an opportunity to do that.

The agency's "preferred" alternative — which the document is quick to point out is merely a starting point for discussions — would divide the monument into four management areas, with different levels of development and access in each. Grazing allotments not currently under permit would be permanently closed to livestock. New range improvements would be limited or prohibited. And off-road vehicles would be banned from the Primitive Area and selected other areas and limited to designated routes in the rest of the monument.

It's a lot less than most conservationists were looking for. It would leave 85% of the monument open to tens of thousands of grazing cattle trampling fragile cryptobiotic soils. But Scott Berry, board president of the Grand Staircase Escalante Partners, a nonprofit founded to protect and preserve the monument, urges the environmental community to get behind the plan.

"Political forces in Utah are going to do everything in their power to prevent the new plan from being adopted," he said, "which would leave the Trump (plan) the controlling authority."

To comment, visit the Bureau of Land Management's planning site by Nov. 9:
<https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2020343/510>

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