

Senator Robert Bennett
Utah

Interviewer-John Howe

Senator Bennett, start out by talking about the Washington County Lands Bill. Why is it important? And talk about the land that's protected.

Senator Bennett

Some of the most spectacular wilderness in the entire country is in Washington County, and it has been the most disputed, the most fought over of the wilderness in Utah. So, the fact that we were able to get a deal, we were able to bring it, all of the people together in a way that satisfies most of them, not all by any means, but most of them, is really quite amazing. I've been trying to do that really since I came to the Senate, back in 1993 and the forces have been so intractable, the opposing forces, for so long, that it looked like it would never happen. But now it has happened, and I think that most of the folks are pretty much pleased with it.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why was that such a difficult compromise? How did you bring these opposing sides together?

Senator Bennett

Well, it was difficult because the previous positions had been so dug in, so firmly uncompromising on both sides. The folks that lived there felt abused by people who did not live there, who, nonetheless, wanted to come into their backyard and say, we're going to take this land and we're going to lock it off from you and for any activity that you might want to undertake--and, you shouldn't be living there. Actually, there was a situation where some people in Congress said to the people from southern Utah, "You should move. You should not be living on this land." And, of course, that created a tremendous kind of resistance on the part of the folks who live there. Then, the people who were trying to protect the land, with the wilderness designation, would not listen for many years to any kind of suggestion that, perhaps, this piece of land wasn't worth the fight. Perhaps that piece of land had some other uses that could be, could be made, and, it just got deeper and deeper on both sides.

Interviewer-John Howe

The word "wilderness" has become controversial. Why do you think that is?

Senator Bennett

A lot of people don't understand it. It is a legal term of art, and, when I make the statement, which is absolutely true under the law, that only Congress can create wilderness. A lot of people get very angry about that and say, "Oh! God created the wilderness. You can't create wilderness." Wilderness is defined by the Wilderness Act, which says that it can be designated only by the Congress, as a place that is untrammeled by man, so the argument arises, well, has man ever been here? If he has, this isn't wilderness under the definition of the law. Or, well, maybe he has, but all traces of human activity have now been erased by time, so it's been restored to wilderness again and we must protect it. The wilderness designation is, perhaps, the most severe designation that Congress can put on a piece of land in terms of anybody using it, or

accessing it. You cannot go into wilderness with any kind of mechanized vehicle. That means, not only no Jeep, that means no bicycle, no wheeled game cart. You shoot a deer in wilderness; you have to take it out on your back, or, by horseback. So, human or animal power is the only power you can use to get in or get out, and, for a lot of people, that's just too tight a restriction for land that they feel they ought to have access to.

Interviewer-John Howe

You expressed concern with Secretary Salazar's revoking of the oil and gas leases. Tell me why, what do you think should have been done there?

Senator Bennett

My concern over the oil and gas leases was that the rules had been followed and then they appeared to be cast aside, and by that I mean that those who applied for those leases, seriously--there was the one individual who just went in and bid wildly--but those who seriously applied for the leases had gone through all the requirements laid down by the Department of Interior. In many cases, they had been at it for as long as seven years, dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's. One of the things that was done by the local BLM people was to make sure that the National Park Service was consulted, even though the law does not require it. That is, they went above and beyond the strict requirements of the law to make sure they were doing the right thing in the right way. And then to have those leases summarily pulled by the Secretary of Interior sent the message that abiding by the rules didn't matter anymore. Abiding by the rules and doing everything that's required by the law wouldn't make any difference. It was just a matter of how the Secretary felt. I've had people who work at the BLM come to me and say, "Senator, we're grateful to you for standing up for us and our work. We're grateful to you to say, for saying we, in the BLM, did the right thing. We deserve to be recognized for having done the right thing, and frankly we felt abused by the Secretary's action, and very pleased that you took the position that you did."

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me why those oil and gas leases are so important to rural economies.

Senator Bennett

Rural Utah is always looking for more economic activity, economic activity that is consistent with the rural lifestyle, but economic activity, frankly, that can pay the bills, and one of the very best ways of moving in that direction is through natural gas. The nation has discovered that it has an enormous reservoir of natural gas, a very good portion of it on public lands, and the Energy Department is very anxious to exploit the natural gas, and we have it here in Utah. Now, if the people who play by the rules and get their leases accepted see those leases turned away by a summarily, almost capricious, action on the part of the Secretary, they're going to say, "We'll take our rigs and we will go someplace else." There's natural gas from private land available for us, to drill for, in Oklahoma and Texas and other places. That means that the state of Utah will lose hundreds of millions of dollars ultimately in royalties that could go to help balance the state budget, help educate the state's children, et cetera, et cetera. And, natural gas is, perhaps, the least intrusive way of getting some kind of economic benefit out of these lands.

Interviewer-John Howe

You mentioned the, so-called, Bogus Bidder. What did you think about that action, and what do you think should be the outcome of that?

Senator Bennett

Well, I understand that there's legal action going forward. I'm not a lawyer, so I'm probably not capable of, or competent, to comment on the aspects of the case, but I'm glad the law is looking at it, and I think he should be subject to prosecution if, indeed, what he did was illegal.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you see any parallel with the protests that have been happening down in southern Utah regarding ATV use and that kind of thing, civil disobedience, if you will. Is there any parallel there?

Senator Bennett

I suppose breaking the law is breaking the law, so you have parallel in that regard. His actions, I think, were more dramatic than some of the actions that I've heard about in that he disrupted a series of very legal and very proper activities that were going on. He wasn't out to make a point the way some of the ATV people are, and openly do something that might invite arrest in order to make their point. He was, he was doing something to disrupt legitimate activity and legitimate business and commerce.

Interviewer-John Howe

How is the environmental community to work with? What do you think should be done there?

Senator Bennett

Well, with respect to the Washington County Lands Use bill, I found members of the environmental community very easy to work with, much more so than had been the case in the years that I was talking about in my earlier answer, the earlier years of my career. Bill Meadows of the Wilderness Society came in to see me. We were very frank with each other, and that was a breakthrough, because many of the times earlier when I've talked with members of the environmental community, they frankly were not up front with me, and they would smile. They would say nice things, but it was very clear they didn't mean them, and their actions, later on, made it very clear they didn't mean them. They were, they had a facade of cooperation, but it was not there. Bill made it very clear that the Wilderness Society was now ready for real cooperation, real compromise, and a real deal. So did Hansjorg Wyss, who is the past Chairman of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and Ted Wilson, who was past Vice Chairman of SUWA. As individuals, they were very open. They were very helpful, and when we got down to the ground, going over the ground, making the decisions, they and their Wilderness Society staff were very realistic in saying, "We recognize this piece is not as valuable to wilderness as that piece, and yes, we might like it all, but we recognize that the people on the ground should have a say and we should be willing to listen to what they have, have to say." So, there's some in the environmental community that are still, frankly, very uncompromising on this issue and will continue to smile and nod, but absolutely not be available to make any kind of a deal, and they I will find, continue to find, difficult to work with, but there are others that have demonstrated that they're tired of this fight. They want it resolved, and it's because of them that we were able to get

the thing done.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk a little bit about the feeling of rural economies and rural towns in wilderness, specifically like the Grand Staircase National Monument, the way that was created, how that was created, and why it left some bad feelings.

Senator Bennett

Well, the bitterness over the monument is still there in rural Utah. I can fully understand that because not only were they not consulted as early or as late, if you will, as three or four days before President Clinton announced it. I was still being told by members of the administration that it was under consideration and no final decision had been made, and that's flat not true. You don't have the President of the United States scheduled to go to an event on Wednesday and say, well, on Monday it's still up in the air. A president's schedules are set in stone long before that. They knew exactly what was going to happen, and they were not telling me, and they certainly were not telling any of the people on the ground, and, then when it did happen, in that kind of secrecy, it became clear they had made some very serious mistakes. For example, at one point, we looked at the boundary of the Grand Staircase, and the line they had drawn went through a soccer field on a high school, so, on one side it was clear--wait a minute. We didn't take the time we needed to take to do this right. So, the bitterness was very much there. Now, those who said, "Well, the establishment of a new national monument will be a great economic boom because look at all the visitors it will bring." And, I remember one comment saying, "We like the extraction industry. It's the extraction of money out of the pockets of the visitors who've come, and they will bring economic prosperity to rural Utah." We've not had very many visitors to the Grand Staircase Monument, and those who have come look at it, and kind of look around and say, "This is a national monument? Wait a minute. Why is this designated as something particularly special?" because, quite frankly, it's not. It's not the kind of thing that visitors to America, or visitors from other parts of America coming to Utah, expect to see in either a national monument or a national park.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think could be done to Grand Staircase to improve that situation?

Senator Bennett

Well I said to Secretary Babbitt at the time it was created, I certainly can't oppose the creation of the national monument in Utah if it's going to bring people here. Now, a national monument means a visitor's center. It means some paved roads so that people can get to the particular scenic points, and it probably means, if you're going to truly treat it as a monument, the paving of the Burr Trail. And, Secretary Babbitt made it clear that he was not in favor of the paving of the Burr Trail. And, the creation of the national monument, quite frankly, was done to try to get a form of wilderness protection in an area that Congress was never going to say was truly wilderness, and the main target of all of that was the coal fields down on the Kaiparowits Plateau. Now, I don't think we would exploit those coal fields now, but a lot of the local people thought they wanted to get at them and were very bitter that this was denied to them in this fashion rather than in any other way of talking the thing through.

Interviewer-John Howe

I wanted to talk just a little bit about climate change. What do you think about that theory, if you will, and how will that affect rural economies in terms of wilderness, and global warming and climate change?

Senator Bennett

There's no question but what the climate is changing, and there's no question but what the planet has been warming. Now, in the last ten years it's been cooling, and there are those who say, "Well that's part of the warming cycle. It goes up and comes down, and then goes up more, and comes down, and then goes up more," so that we should not be deceived by the recent cooling as to say that the overall trend is turned around. I've talked to the scientists at the national labs that have done the models, which have looked at the climate, and I get, frankly, a mixed message from them. They tell me, those who are skeptics are right in that there's still a great deal about the climate that we don't know, and we are making some assumptions that could very possibly be wrong. Those who say there's nothing to it are wrong, however, because there's no question that there are changes going on in the climate and that the amount of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere may very well have an impact on that, but they said, "We've really only studied two things, that is, global temperature and acidity in the oceans, and there are at least three, or four, or five more things we need to study before we can really know what's going on." And when they told me that I said, "How long will it take for those other things to be studied so that we can really know what's going on?" and they said, "At least ten years." Now, I'm perfectly willing to fund those studies, because I think it's appropriate for us to know what's really going on. So, I guess that puts me on the side of those who say there's some validity in the theory with respect to greenhouse gases. On the other hand, the climatologists, whose judgment I trust, say, "Let's not be quite so quick to make all of the decisions that people seem to be making about what can stop the changes in the climate." As one climatologist said, "We get all of our heat from the sun. We can't argue with the sun. And there are changes going on in the activity of the sun, which the greenhouse gases have no impact on at all." So, I'm open to being informed. I think we need to take some time looking at the question of emissions and, if possible, do everything we can to cut down the emissions, but I'm not one who says it's inevitable that the climate is going to be destroyed in the next fifty to one hundred years.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you see for the future of wilderness in the West? What do you think is going to happen over the next few years?

Senator Bennett

Well, the Washington County Land Use Bill gave me a glimpse into the thinking that's going on in the environmental groups, and I find that they are not monolithic. There are those, like those who cooperated with us in putting the bill together, who said, "Time is not on our side. If we don't make the kinds of compromises and the kinds of deal that the Washington County Land Use Bill represents, we're going to physically lose the wilderness because of encroachment and people going in a variety of ways." There are those on the other side who fought us in the Washington County Land Use Bill, who say, "No. Time is on our side and if we can just stop the making of any kind of a deal now, over time, the populace, the voters, will come to our side and say, 'We must have more, more, more,' and your action is saying, 'Well, let's settle for this, this,

this.' We're not ready to settle." That's a very real debate and a very real schism that exists in the environmental community. Obviously I think the first group I referred to are right, that wilderness should be protected. The way to protect it is to recognize the realities of where we are now and try to make agreements now. One of the other things that Bill Meadows said to me that struck home, he said, "We have found that wilderness agreements don't really work unless there's local buy-in. If it's imposed on the local people without a local buy-in and a local agreement, there's nothing but trouble." And one of the interesting side effects of the work we did on the Washington County Land Use Bill was to discover that the Land Managers had not been given a voice in this 'til now. We spent a lot of time with the people who need to manage the wilderness, and they helped us re-draw the maps by saying, "It might be nice to draw the map here, to keep this as wilderness from the environmentalist's point of view. We can tell you from a management point of view, we can't protect that land. We can't manage it as wilderness, because of the things that are going on around it, and the wilderness that we can protect will be better protected if you take that out of wilderness status and recognize the realities on the ground." I'm hoping that listening to the Land Managers, and listening to the people in the environmental community that want to make the deal will make it possible for us to make more deals like the one we did in Washington County, not only throughout this state, but other states.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do we actually need more wilderness? I'm thinking about the Red Rock Wilderness Act. Do we need more legislation and more wilderness or do you think it's about right?

Senator Bennett

Well, I'm opposed to the Red Rock Act because I think, given the answer I've just given you, it would produce an enormous negative reaction of the people on the ground and create nothing but antagonism, and, you talked about the civil disobedience of the folks reacting to the Washington County Bill, you would, I think, get some massive civil disobedience with respect to the Red Rock Bill. Alright, people get arrested, people get thrown in jail, but, their impact on the land might very well be irreversible, so, it's far, far better to say, as we did in Washington County, "Let's isolate that where there can be agreement, that this is truly wilderness, and get that protected as our first priority."