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Utah reacts to Biden monument decision on Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante

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BY SIMONE SEIKALY AND PAUL NELSON | OCTOBER 7, 2021 AT 2:36 PM
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The Bears Ears in Utah's San Juan County, a 1.35 million acre region studded with tens of thousands of archaeological jewels spread across a landscape of stunning red-rock scenery. Photo credit: Mike DeBernardo, Deseret News

WASHINGTON D.C. — Utah's governor, entire congressional delegation, and others within the state have reacted to an announcement that President Biden will expand Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears National Monuments.

Mr. Biden's actions will reverse a move by President Donald Trump in 2017 that reduced the size of the monuments by 85%.

In a statement sent to the media, Gov. Spencer Cox said the decision is disappointing.

“President Biden's decision to expand the monuments is disappointing, though not surprising. For the past 10 months, we have consistently offered to work with the Biden

Administration on a permanent, legislative solution, one that would end the perpetual enlarging and shrinking of these monuments and bring certainty to their management. Our goal has been to make lasting progress on managing our public lands for the benefit of all those who use them, particularly those who live on and near those lands.”

Gov. Cox also joined with Lt. Gov. Henderson, Utah Attorney General Sen Reyes and others in a tweet, citing disappointment for the decision.

Utah’s Senior Senator Mike Lee said the move was a devastating blow to ongoing efforts by the Utah delegation to find a permanent legislative solution to the problem of monument boundaries in Utah.

Sen. Lee tweeted again that he spoke with President Biden and offered to work with him on a “permanent fix.”

Political football

Sen. Mitt Romney compared the differing decisions from different Presidential Administrations on the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante monuments “political football.”

Sen. Romney echoed Sen. Lee with a desire to keep working with stakeholders to find a permanent solution.

A mixed reaction of love and hate from county leaders

We’re seeing polar opposite reactions from elected officials in the counties impacted by President Biden’s decision to restore the monuments to their original boundaries. Some say President Biden is keeping the promise made by former leaders to native tribes, while others call the decision a slap in the face.

Grand County supported the full restoration for a long time. The Grand County Attorney penned an op-ed to the Moab Times earlier this year calling on the president to restore Bears Ears National Monument, saying President Trump’s decision to shrink it went against the wishes of most people.

County Chair Mary McGann says her friends in native tribes were devastated when the monument was reduced.

She says, “Their response was, ‘You’ve never kept a treaty before. Why should this time be any different?’ That really hit me.”

McGann says their call to restore the monuments was a sign of respect to the native tribes who wanted to keep the boundaries as they were originally established.

“It’s historic that this many tribes have come together to agree on something,” she says.

Even though Grand County was specifically asking for Bears Ears to be restored, she says they also support the restoration of Grand Staircase-Escalante, saying people need to be better stewards of the land. However, Garfield County Commission Chair Leland Pollock says the land wasn’t actually being managed well under the original system.

“We have to remember, for 20 years, the monument did not work. It was dysfunctional. It was a disaster,” Pollock says.

He says a large portion of the Grand Staircase-Escalante land should have never been designated as monument land. Under the older boundaries, county officials weren’t able to allow grazing or promote tourism to the area. Plus, he says the Bureau of Land Management should have never been chosen to oversee the monuments. Pollock says they were able to create a much better management system when the boundaries were reduced.

“It’s just sad because you took something that was working very well, that was working for the BLM agency folks and it was working for the tourism industry,” Pollock says. “You’re taking that and reversing it back to a mess.”