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Lands Bill is Major Breakthrough

Fierce debate over BLM wilderness has been going on for more than 30 years. Millions of acres of wilderness study areas have been in limbo for decades. When Gov. **Mike Leavitt** took office in 1993 and I served as his policy deputy, one of our first initiatives was to try, somewhat naively it turned out, to bring all sides together to deal with BLM wilderness. It didn't take long for the effort to flop amid bitter acrimony. Key interest groups wouldn't even come to the table. Many efforts have been made in ensuing years to deal with BLM wilderness, with little success.

That's why the new Washington County lands bill introduced Wednesday by Sen. **Bob Bennett** (and sponsored in the House by Rep. **Jim Matheson**) is something of a miracle. The planets and stars have aligned. The major players have compromised and are in agreement. This is a really big deal, the best opportunity to deal with wilderness and a host of other environmental issues in many decades. It's much bigger than Washington County because the legislation establishes precedents that can be used in counties all across the state where BLM wilderness has been a festering sore for so many years.

Clearly, the legislation is a compromise and all sides had to give a little. And a lot of work remains to be done to get it through Congress. The legislation deals with a lot more than just wilderness, but wilderness has been a major point of contention. Environmental groups wanted more wilderness. Local political leaders wanted less. If long-standing environmental conflicts can be resolved in Washington County, they can be resolved anywhere else in Utah.

Every tough and emotional issue is greatly magnified in Washington County. It is Utah's most ecologically diverse county, with numerous endangered plants and animals. It is also one of the fastest-growing counties in the country, with limited private land, a big shortage of water, and a patchwork of federal and state agencies overseeing land in the county.

Bennett and Matheson deserve commendation, along with the Washington County Commission and other local leaders, and also environmental groups like The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, and the National Parks Conservation Association, all of whom are supporting the bill.