

Federal land claims amendment a no-go
Deal would up oversight of BLM land claims

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WASHINGTON - Environmentalists said they were pleased Wednesday with an agreement by congressional appropriators for more oversight of rights-of-way claims on federal lands.

The deal came after Rep. Mark Udall, D-Colo., withdrew an amendment that would prohibit the Bureau of Land Management from using taxpayer money to decide if counties or states had rights to backcountry pathways. Previously, courts made such determinations but a rule change last year allowed the agency to do it unilaterally. Under the agreement, hammered out on the House floor between Udall and House Appropriations Interior subcommittee chairman Norman Dicks, R-Wash., the Interior Department will submit quarterly reports to the committee and there will be more congressional oversight of administrative decisions regarding R.S. 2477 claims.

"It's not business as usual anymore," said Heidi McIntosh, conservation director for Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "The R.S. 2477 abuses are going to be curtailed, we believe."

Utah GOP Reps. Chris Cannon and Rob Bishop fought against the amendment, with Cannon calling it a "serious threat" to Western counties.

"The net effect of the Udall amendment is a federally mandated power grab from rural Western counties," Cannon said. "This amendment will result in restricted access to public lands, restricted energy development and restricted states rights."

Cannon said later he was glad Udall chose to withdraw his "ill-conceived" amendment.

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