

Nevada staking claim to federal land

State's U.S. lawmakers introduced bill in June to sell about 87,000 acres

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ALAMO, Nev. - This was territory nobody wanted - not homesteaders, not city dwellers, not even the railroads. It remained the big empty: a state-size expanse of sagebrush, canyon lands and jagged mountains left almost entirely to the federal government.

But now Nevada's Lincoln County, a 10,637-square-mile piece of the lonely Old West, might be headed for some New West boom. "Let us grow. Let us develop our water. Let us bring in some industry," pleads County Commissioner Tim Perkins.

The Nevada congressional delegation is doing its best to oblige. In June, members introduced a bill that would ease the way for hundreds of miles of water pipelines across federal land and carve out 87,000 acres of public holdings to sell for private development around the county's scattered little communities.

Big enough to swallow New Hampshire and Rhode Island, Lincoln County is home to fewer than 5,000 people. An air of abandonment hangs over many of

its settlements. Occasional gas stations and small markets are strung along the roads. Ranchers in pickups rumble up to tiny cafes veiled in homemade curtains to catch up on the local gossip.

With about 1,800 residents, Pioche - the county seat and historic silver-mining center a three-hour drive northeast of Las Vegas - is as bustling as the county gets.

The proposal to sell off federal land here is the latest in a series of congressional acts, launched in 1998, that are helping fuel southern Nevada's explosive expansion. The approach Nevada officials are pushing is being eyed as a model in other Western states where the federal government controls huge swaths of land.

Heading for the desert

Originally designed to divest the U.S. Bureau of Land Management of property it owned around the Las Vegas Strip - so-called urban islands that didn't make sense for a wild-land management agency to keep - the Nevada land bills now reach beyond the metropolitan fringe into distant desert.

Nevada congressmen promise more to come as they move to pare the federal government's historic share of their state.

"We have 17 counties. We have 15 to go after this," said the Senate's second-highest-ranking Democrat, Harry Reid of Nevada, who with others in the delegation intends to draw up similar bills for every county in the state.

In addition to selling federal land, the bills funnel portions of the proceeds to local and state government to subsidize any ensuing growth. The Lincoln bill would hand 45 percent of the sales revenue to county government to foster economic development - a bigger share for locals than granted in any previous southern Nevada legislation.

"This is a fairness issue here," said Rep. Jim Gibbons, a Nevada Republican who has been pushing to give local and state government a larger piece of the revenue pie.

"Everything that you and I rely on for our county government to do," he said, "they struggle with, because there is no private land there and

no tax base. There aren't many people, but they are spread out. They still need roads, they still need a court system, they still need schools."

Where Gibbons sees equity, others see a giant giveaway of public resources.

"It's a big-time lands bill, set up to facilitate development in a part of Nevada that doesn't have the resources or water to support it," said ecologist Daniel Patterson of the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, one of several environmental groups opposed to the Lincoln proposal.

"You're talking about selling a national asset - land that belongs to the American people - and the money goes into the pocket of the county," he said.

The legislation taps resentment of the federal government's pervasive presence that is deeply rooted in Nevada. Bypassed by homesteaders for more hospitable territory, most of the state remained in federal hands after the frontier's closing.

Today, Nevadans repeat ownership statistics like an angry dirge: 86 percent is controlled by the federal government, a greater percentage than in any other state in the nation. In Lincoln County, the figure is 98 percent.

"Nevada is very much like a colonial possession in terms of control of the actual land," said Eric Herzik, a political science professor at the University of Nevada, Reno. "To speak of the county is almost

laughable. It's a swath of federal land." The land legislation, he said, is a way to redress a historical imbalance.

But as the auctions spread beyond the booming Las Vegas Valley, some environmentalists say they are creating a dangerous national model and promoting leap-frog growth in a state already in the grip of a historic drought and clamoring for more water.

"There's a reason most of Nevada belongs to the public: It's very arid," Patterson said. "Nevada is one of those states where the environment can't support a lot of development."

Environmental activists are especially critical of the Lincoln bill's water provisions, which they contend would speed groundwater development that could dry up eastern Nevada.

The legislation additionally attempts to override a court decision by ordering the Bureau of Land Management to proceed with the sale of almost 13,500 acres on the county's southeastern border, near the town of Mesquite. The auctions, authorized in an earlier bill, were blocked this year by a federal judge, who found that the environmental impact of developing the acreage had not been documented adequately.

Sagebrush rebellion

To Charles Wilkinson, it all smacks of the so-called sagebrush rebellion, the failed 1970s movement by Nevada and other states to wrest control of public

lands from the federal government.

"It's in a somewhat different guise but very recognizable," said Wilkinson, a University of Colorado Law School professor and expert on public lands.

"What you have, instead of a recognition that federal public lands are there for all of us - are there to create open space - you have flat-out sales of public lands," he said. "Second, you have a real cave-in to local interests, as opposed to national interests. And third, you've got an emphasis on water development."

Reid said that he is no sagebrush rebel, but that his state, the home of the nation's nuclear test site and proposed nuclear waste repository, deserves some relief from federal dominance.

"I opposed the sagebrush rebellion. I think what we're doing is very sensible and incremental and is being done with a great deal of thought," he said. "And when it's all over, we'll have some beautiful wilderness areas."

Along with authorizing land auctions, the bills set aside federal land for wilderness protection. The Lincoln County proposal would establish more than 750,000 acres of wilderness, including prized canyon lands and mountain ranges that belie the state's stereotype as barren desert.

That approach - combining land sales and wilderness designations in one package - is catching attention elsewhere in the West.

Inspired by the Nevada legislation, Rep. Michael K. Simpson, an Idaho Republican, is drafting a bill to create about 300,000 acres of wilderness in the central part of his state while giving more than 1,000 acres of national forest - some of it in a congressionally designated national recreation area and worth millions of dollars - to the local county to sell for development.

Such linkages place conservationists in an awkward position. But some say they may be the only way to gain protections for wilderness areas.

“Certainly our preference would be a pure wilderness bill,” said Shaaron Netherton, executive director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness. “I think in a state like Nevada that’s a difficult thing.”

Nobody expects the Lincoln County land to be snapped up at the sizzling pace or prices set by the Las Vegas auctions. But, County Commissioner Perkins said, “I know from talking to developers there is a lot of interest.”

He envisions second homes sprouting in Pioche and in the county’s southern tier, where he lives - spillover development from Las Vegas.

Perkins, who drives 90 miles one way to work hauling dirt at Las Vegas construction sites, pointed to a map of the state. “If Vegas is moving north,” he asked, “where are they going first?”