



## Reid wants Jewell's ear on protecting Nevada's 'Grand Canyon'

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Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) wants the Obama administration's help in protecting public lands in southern Nevada, including Gold Butte and a desert valley that includes one of the world's largest pieces of earthen art.

Reid on Oct. 24, 2014, sent a letter to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell asking her to convene a public stakeholder meeting in Las Vegas to discuss various conservation efforts in southern Nevada, including his legislation to protect Gold Butte, Garden Valley and the Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument.

Reid's S. 974, to designate the 22,700-acre Tule Spring monument, was passed last Congress as part of the National Defense Authorization Act.

But his other bills, S. 1054, to designate the 350,000-acre Gold Butte National Conservation Area, and S. 2820, to withdraw more than 800,000 acres of Garden Valley from future energy development or mining, were left on the cutting room floor.

Reid's letter to Jewell, which Greenwire obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, did not ask for the president to protect those areas as national monuments, but it did

request Jewell's "partnership" in working with the Nevada delegation on long-term protections.

"Legislation has always been [Reid's] priority, but he's not opposed to designations," said Reid spokeswoman Kristin Orthman.

Reid recalled growing up in Searchlight, Nev., and developing a kinship with public lands while hunting and hiking in the deserts and mountains. "From those experiences, I have determined that our dramatic landscapes need to be protected for our children and grandchildren to experience as I have," he wrote.

Reid's Gold Butte bill would designate a 350,000-acre national conservation area, as well as 220,000 acres of wilderness protections within it. The Bureau of Land Management currently manages most of the area as an area of critical environmental concern. Reid has called Gold Butte "Nevada's piece of the Grand Canyon," which is just across the Arizona border.

The area north of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area and along the Arizona border is where Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy has illegally grazed his cattle and where states' rights demonstrators brandished weapons last April when the Bureau of Land Management began rounding up Bundy's cows.

Gold Butte is named for a ghost town where about 1,000 miners prospected for gold, mica, magnesite, copper and zinc in the early 1900s. But today, the area's multihued rocks, petroglyphs and slot canyons make it a destination for hikers, campers, off-highway vehicle riders and mountain bikers who come to escape the bustle of nearby Las Vegas.

Jewell has not hosted a meeting in Las Vegas, nor has she responded to Reid's letter.

But a secretarial visit to Las Vegas would signal strong interest by the Obama administration in designating the area a national monument. Past secretarial visits have been followed by landscape-scale monument designations at New Mexico's Rio Grande del Norte and Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks and California's San Gabriel Mountains.

Reid's legislation is unlikely to move in a Republican-controlled Congress, particularly since it is not supported by Sen. Dean Heller (R-Nev.). Heller last summer said he strongly opposes Obama's use of the Antiquities Act to protect Gold Butte, saying his constituents have "strong differences of opinion" on the matter.

"The use of your authority under the Antiquities Act would not serve the area well and would escalate anger and frustrations with the Department of the Interior government in a region of our state where tensions are already presently high," Heller said in a letter to Obama then. "New land designations ought to be considered in the open and public congressional process so all parties, including those who support and oppose the measure, have an equal opportunity to voice their concerns."

Rep. Dina Titus (D-Nev.), who co-sponsored a bill by Rep. Steven Horsford (D-Nev.) last Congress to designate a Gold Butte NCA, last February sent a letter to Obama urging that a monument be declared, saying "political gamesmanship by Republican leaders in the House threatens these lands."

The Center for Biological Diversity is calling for a national monument and for the lands to be transferred to the National Park Service.

"The time has come to protect Nevada's Gold Butte region as a national monument," CBD said in a petition drive it launched last summer, warning that Gold Butte was threatened by rogue cattle and renegade off-highway vehicle riding. "This 350,000-acre expanse of public land is a vital habitat for rare and endangered species like desert tortoises, kit foxes and burrowing owls -- but without protections for this landscape, these species may soon disappear."

David Bobzien, high desert program and digital director for the Conservation Lands Foundation, said a diverse coalition of Nevadans has been working for more than a decade to secure permanent protection of Gold Butte but that Congress has failed to act.

"We're still hopeful Congress will act," he said. "But if they don't, a national monument would be a good option to accomplish the community's conservation goals and ensure this unique area is protected for future generations."

Reid's other conservation bill, S. 2820, would protect 800,000 acres of Garden Valley in Nye and Lincoln counties and buffer artist

Michael Heizer's "City," an earth sculpture that has taken decades to build and will be as large as the National Mall, according to media reports.

Heizer has used bulldozers, cranes and other heavy machinery "to reshape a slice of desert into his vision," according to the Las Vegas Review-Journal.