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In Our Opinion: Lands bill good for Utah

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At first glance, it would be easy to side with Oklahoma Sen. Tom Coburn, who has waged a filibuster against a package of more than 160 public lands bills. It contains wasteful earmarks and would lock up some land that otherwise could be used for oil and gas extraction, he said.

Waste and barriers to extraction are two of Congress' worst character traits and ought to be stopped.

But as far as Utah is concerned, the bills contain a lot of good. Overturning the filibuster, as the Senate did Sunday, 66-12, was the first step toward ending ridiculously long delays on much-needed items in this state.

First and foremost of these is a Washington County lands bill that came about as a remarkable feat of cooperation between Utah Sen. Bob Bennett, a Republican, and Utah Rep. Jim Matheson, a Democrat. Their bill, the Washington County Growth & Conservation Act, would open a good deal of public land for development, easing a growth crunch in the St. George area that threatened to make housing difficult, and expensive, to obtain. The economic downturn may have eased the immediate need for this bill somewhat, but that is only a temporary situation.

Sunday's vote was the first step toward creating 264,394 acres of wilderness in Washington County and designating a stretch of the Virgin River near Zion National Park as a wild and scenic river. It also would create two national conservation areas in the county and allow the federal government to sell land it owns that is not environmentally sensitive and could be used for development.

The Bennett-Matheson bill is a compromise measure that has at least tepid support from all interested parties, although some would like it amended. St. George, with an estimated population of 67,614 in 2006, showed a growth rate of 36 percent during the first six years of the decade. Washington County's population is approaching 150,000. The lands bill is needed quickly as the area begins to plan for even greater growth.

The bills also would rectify a surveying error that put the home of a program for troubled youth in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. As far as Utah is concerned, these are not wasteful or harmful measures at all.

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