

Naval Air Station Patuxent River, MD, for extensive engineering investigation and analysis. They are taking the airplanes apart at Pax River. I applaud this action. Initial results of the testing should be available next week with more information to follow as the data is processed. At the same time, engineers have teamed up with pilots from both the test community and the training command, including at least one Meridian instructor pilot. They are investigating possible mitigations, such as alterations to pilot masks. This will allow our instructors and student pilots to get back to what they want to do most; that is, to fly and train new pilots to fly.

In addition, on April 21, Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Moran, directed Admiral Scott Swift, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, to lead a month-long review of the facts, circumstances, and processes surrounding the recent episodes and how the Navy has addressed them. The Swift review will evaluate the Navy's organizational structures and processes and make recommendations for additional action.

These efforts are desperately needed. Still, we have no real diagnosis. Still, we have no real solution in the works. Senators should know this: As of 3 weeks ago, problems with histotoxic hypoxia at our naval training bases have earned the full attention of the top leadership in the Navy. These problems also have the full attention and oversight of the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Seapower Subcommittee.

I look forward to continued interaction with the Navy leadership on this very important issue.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah.

ANTIQUITIES ACT

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, I rise to commemorate an important day for Utah and the western way of life. Just yesterday, the President signed an Executive order calling for review of monument designations across the United States, with a specific focus on two national monuments that have caused significant damage in my home State of Utah: Bears Ears and the Grand Staircase-Escalante.

Yesterday's Executive action is the culmination of countless hours of hard work and close coordination with the White House. When I first spoke with President Trump in the Oval Office during his first week on the job, I asked for his help in addressing the Bears Ears debacle. From day one, our President has been committed to helping us fix this disaster and ensuring that our smallest counties get a fair shake.

Throughout my Senate service, I have fought to give voice to the needs of our rural communities in the debate over public lands. Too often, past Presidents have ignored the concerns of Utah's families in declaring massive

monuments that threaten the western way of life. Too often, Presidents have abused the authority under the Antiquities Act to satisfy the demands of an extreme environmental agenda but no more.

Following yesterday's Executive order, I look forward to working with the Trump administration to address past abuses and restore the original meaning of the Antiquities Act. The Executive order directs Secretary of Interior Ryan Zinke to review dozens of national monuments. This is a welcomed opportunity to set a new precedent for the responsible use of the Antiquities Act—a precedent that will take into account the needs of locals and foster greater trust between the States and the Federal Government as we work toward a shared goal of preserving our cultural antiquities.

For decades, I have sought to rein in Executive abuse under the Antiquities Act. That is why I traveled to Bears Ears just last week to hear firsthand from the local residents and Tribal members who have been hurt most by this monument designation. That is why, in the opening days of his Presidency, I met personally with President Trump in the Oval Office to discuss the public lands issue at length. I made clear to the President that Utahns have had enough of monument designations that come down unilaterally with zero support from locals, State officials, or Congress. Many of my own constituents have had their lives upended by this abuse of Executive power.

For too long, Utahns—many of whom depend on public lands for their very livelihood—have been at the mercy of out-of-touch bureaucrats who have little knowledge or personal connection to the land. President Obama only made their situation worse when he spurned the men and women of San Juan County by declaring the Bears Ears National Monument last December. In doing so, he defied the will of the State legislature, the Governor, and the entire Utah congressional delegation. President Obama's last-minute monument designation imposed even greater land use restrictions on a region that is already predominately controlled by the Federal Government.

As I have said before, in opposing the Bears Ears National Monument designation, I am in no way opposing the protection of lands that need to be protected. Indeed, there are many cultural sites in Utah that warrant preservation, and I am committed to working with the President and with Congress to protect those sacred places for future generations. But as I have also said previously, I believe that it is both unlawful and undemocratic for any President to seize millions upon millions of acres of land through the Antiquities Act—a law that was geared to give the President only narrow authority to designate special landmarks, such as a unique national arch or the site of old cliff dwellings.

We desperately need a new process for creating national monuments. Congress and impacted local communities, not the President alone, should have a say in decisions that restrict access to millions of acres of federally owned land. In making such decisions, the voice of the people is paramount.

Let me be clear: Abusing the Antiquities Act at the expense of local communities is not a sustainable public lands strategy. This strategy is counterintuitive because it puts Antiquities Act authority at great risk. The Antiquities Act was designed to provide specific protections for objects of antiquity, but out West, particularly in Utah, the law has become synonymous with land grabs and Federal overreach.

Restoring the legitimacy of Antiquities Act authority in the eyes of westerners requires a more measured approach to monument designations, an approach that takes into account the needs of locals and restores trust between States and the Federal Government.

To be clear, I have no objection when Presidents use the Antiquities Act according to its original purpose, which was to protect cultural antiquities by designating the minimum acreage necessary. Take, for example, the great State of Washington, which is home to several national monuments that were created in line with the law's original intent. The State's beautiful San Juan Islands cover only 970 acres, while the Hanford Reach encompasses 195,000 acres. At first glance, this amount of acreage may seem large, but compared to Utah's two most prominent national monuments, it is a tiny speck on the map. In fact, the total acreage of the San Juan Islands and Hanford Reach combined is only 6 percent of the size of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments.

In the State of Washington, Presidents have used the Antiquities Act within reason. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for my home State of Utah, where Presidents have repeatedly abused their authority under the law to declare eight national monuments that together span more than 3.3 million acres. In Utah, national monuments cover roughly 10 percent of all Federal land in a State where 67 percent of the land is already owned and dominated by the Federal Government. By contrast, only 28 percent of the land in the State of Washington is owned by the Federal Government. Of that Federal land, only 1.6 percent is locked away as a national monument. It is no wonder, then, that Utahns feel more threatened by the Antiquities Act than Washingtonians. This is a law that past Presidents have brandished as a weapon to cut up entire sections of our State.

This is far from the first time I have taken to the floor to speak out against Antiquities Act abuse. It certainly won't be the last. But I am encouraged by yesterday's Executive order with President Trump and Secretary Zinke

on our side. I believe we can plot a path forward to correct past abuses and forge a new precedent for future monument designations.

The President's Executive action signifies a critical milestone in the effort to include local voices in the management of our public lands. As the Trump administration reviews various national monuments, we must replace the top-down approach of past administrations with a grassroots strategy that engages local leaders, State officials, and Members of Congress in the decision-making process. Bringing all stakeholders to the table is essential to establish a new precedent that will undo the decades of abuse we have endured under, I think, false interpretations of the Antiquities Act.

I am eager to continue working with the President and the Secretary of the Interior to preserve our Nation's cultural treasures in a way that honors the original meaning of the Antiquities Act. I am likewise eager to involve locals in that process. With all parties working together, I firmly believe we can restore a relationship of trust between the States and the Federal Government in the management of public lands.

I am grateful for a President who is willing to work with us to reset the status quo. Better than any of his predecessors, President Trump understands the lasting damage wrought by past Presidents under the Antiquities Act. Indeed, in all my years of public service, I have never seen a President so committed to reining in the Federal Government and so eager to address the problems caused by these over-reaching monument designations.

I wish to thank President Trump and Secretary Zinke for taking concrete steps to rein in abuse through yesterday's Executive order.

I also wish to thank the President's Chief of Staff, Reince Priebus, who helped make yesterday's victory possible. Reince has done exceptionally well in one of the toughest jobs in all of Washington. The President is lucky to have Reince in the White House. I am lucky to call him a friend.

I also wish to thank my former chief of staff, Ron Porter, who is now a special assistant to the President and the Staff Secretary at the White House. Rob is an invaluable asset to the President's team and ours as well. Without him, yesterday's Executive order would never have come to fruition, at least in my opinion. Rob was among the finest men ever to serve as my chief of staff. I have enjoyed watching him succeed at the White House.

Yesterday we took a meaningful first step to fix past abuses under the Antiquities Act. Yet there is still much work to be done, and I look forward to working with the White House every step of the way.

With that, I am grateful for all those who have participated in helping us to right the wrongs that have been going on for far too long, as some of the

Presidents have played pure politics with public lands at the expense of the States involved, especially my State. It is easy to pick on a State that is 67 percent owned by the Federal Government and up to well over 70 percent owned by the Federal and State governments. It is easy to pick on these States—a small State indeed. But our State is resilient. We have some of the better people in Congress, and we also have the ability to be able to raise all kinds of hell here.

All I can say is that I just want my State treated fairly. I want to make sure the bureaucrats here in Washington don't walk all over the West because they think they can because of the wide expanses of territory and the many, many other aspects of the Western States that make them vulnerable to this type of inappropriate activity.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VA ACCOUNTABILITY

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, one goal we share in this body, which is a very bipartisan goal, is keeping faith with our veterans, making sure no veteran is left behind.

I had the great honor to work as ranking member with Senator ISAKSON, the chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, on a bill called the Veterans First Act that unfortunately failed to cross the finish line during the last session. One of the major goals of that bill was to ensure accountability at the Department of Veterans Affairs so employees of the VA who fail to do their job are held accountable. That goal of accountability is one of a number that must be pursued and will be sought during this session, including ending the backlog of appeals and providing better healthcare, ensuring skills training and job opportunities for our veterans.

Today the President signed an Executive order at the Department of Veterans Affairs to designate an individual responsible for accountability and whistleblower protection, a worthwhile first step. It is a commendable step toward accountability. But that individual and the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection must have real responsibility and power and must be insulated from any kind of political interference through establishment through statute. That office should be established by statutory authority. That is why I will be advocating and likely introducing legislation that involves supporting and training employees and listening to veterans about what they want from the VA through that Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection,

to provide real accountability to the Congress by requiring reporting to Congress about what it finds and real whistleblower protection, so that anybody who complains about the VA's misdirected or misguided action is assured protection against any kind of revenge or retaliation, which is the essence of whistleblower protection, and a Senate-confirmed director so that the accountability function is, again, accountable to us. That kind of statutory embodiment is necessary to make sure that the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection has power and reporting requirements so that it is accountable to us as elected representatives and advocates for our veterans.

My hope is that the Senate and House will adopt that provision, one that was contained in the Veterans First bill that Senator ISAKSON and I championed during the last Senate and which I hope we will pursue again in a very bipartisan way.

I also hope that the Senate will take up and pass S. 12, the Increasing the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability to Veterans Act of 2017. My colleague, Senator MORAN, a co-sponsor with me, spoke about it earlier today. It would provide reduction of benefits for senior executives and certain healthcare employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs if they have been convicted of a felony in connection with their work. VA employees who commit serious crimes in connection with their employment should not be receiving pensions. That is one of the key provisions to activate a deterrent to misconduct and also to assure that misconduct is adequately punished.

Accountability for leaders who manage the Department of Veterans Affairs Employee Affairs would be another goal of this legislation, S. 12, so that the men and women who hire and fire are themselves evaluated when they do those jobs.

These kinds of details are important—as important as any new office with an individual whose unspecified powers may include them or not. Right now they do not, under the Executive order, specifically include such enumerated powers. That is our job, to make sure that this office of accountability is real in its responsibility, is clearly assigned in its functions, is held accountable for its performance and has real teeth, not just rhetoric.

I am hopeful that we will move ahead with this very, very important office to make sure that our veterans receive what they deserve—real accountability, a genuine assurance that the people who serve them will do their jobs, not just adequately but excellently. That is the goal that I believe we will share.

I welcome this Executive order. I believe we can and must do more to make sure that the VA keeps faith with our veterans and leaves no veterans behind.

Thank you, Mr. President.