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Federal Land Management: Authorized Uses in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

General Accounting Office

Barry T. Hill

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Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division

B-276464

April 17, 1997

The Honorable Frank Murkowski
Chairman, Committee on Energy
and Natural Resources
United States Senate

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Subject: Federal Land Management: Authorized Uses in the Grand
Staircase-Escalante National Monument

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On September 18, 1996, President Clinton designated about 1.7 million acres of federal land in southern Utah as the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The monument, which covers an area larger than the State of Delaware, is administered by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Within this land area, mineral leases, grazing allotments, and other land-use authorizations remain valid despite the area's designation as a national monument.¹ To respond to your interest in the extent to which these authorized uses exist, we obtained information on the number of mineral leases, grazing permits, and other use authorizations for BLM-managed land within the monument.

In summary, we determined that there were 111 oil, gas, and coal leases, 70 mining claims, 74 grazing allotments, 80 rights-of-way, and a variety of other land-use authorizations for this BLM-managed land as of April 1, 1997. The monument also contains 14 wilderness study areas that cover about 880,000 acres and restrict the types and extent of activities that may occur within their

¹Some of these authorized uses, such as mineral leases for oil, gas, or coal production, have finite terms and will expire unless they are suspended or developed. Grazing permits are subject to renewal, pursuant to existing laws and regulations. Some rights-of-way, such as highways and power lines, are permanent.

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boundaries. It also includes almost 190,000 acres of state and private lands, to which BLM must allow access. Table 1 summarizes information about some of these land-use authorizations.

Table 1: Type and Number of Use Authorizations in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

Type of use authorization	Number of authorizations	Acres covered (rounded to the nearest 100)
Oil and gas leases	89	137,700
Coal leases	22	59,100
Mining claims	70	Not more than 2,400 ^a
Livestock grazing allotments	74	Most of the 1.7 million acres constituting the monument
Rights-of-way	80	7,800

^aThere are two types of mining claims. Lode claims are located along lodes or veins of such minerals as quartz, gold, or silver and cannot exceed 20.7 acres (an area 1,500 feet in length and 600 feet in width). Deposits not located along lodes or veins are called placer claims and are located within public land survey boundaries. They cannot exceed 160 acres in area.

Of the 89 oil and gas leases, 6 have operating oil wells, which produce about 240,000 barrels of oil each year, according to a BLM official. Since the monument's designation, one lessee has applied to BLM for permission to drill on the land covered by one of its federal leases within the monument. In addition to the 89 leases, another lease—for 518 acres—is likely to be issued because a bid was accepted before the monument's designation.² At the time of the designation, 21 applications for new oil and gas leases were pending, but all were rejected because further leasing is not allowed in the national monument. Finally, according to a BLM official, an application for a combined hydrocarbon, or tar sands, lease has been pending since 1982. It has never been approved because of its proximity to the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

²BLM initially rejected the lease, but that decision was appealed to Interior's Board of Land Appeals. According to a BLM official, the lease will be issued with an effective date of October 1, 1996.

Of the 22 coal leases, none has been developed. Eighteen are suspended because of ongoing reviews of environmental issues or potential designations of wilderness areas. Of these 18 leases, 17—covering almost 35,000 acres—are held by AMCA Coal Inc. (Andalex), which may exchange them for federal property outside the monument.³ The other lease—covering over 18,000 acres—is held by PacifiCorp, which had begun negotiations with BLM for a land exchange before the monument was designated. The remaining four leases are being cancelled for failure either to develop them or to pay the rental fees on them. These leases are held by two lessees, one with three leases covering over 5,000 acres and the other with one lease covering almost 1,000 acres. In addition to the 22 coal leases, two operators hold six prospecting permits for coal. These permits can be converted into coal leases if commercial quantities of coal are found.

In addition to sites covered by oil, gas, and coal leases, the monument contains other mineral sites. As of April 1, 1997, there were 70 claims for locatable minerals, such as gold and silver. Of the 70 claims, 63 are lode claims, and 7 are placer claims. The monument also contains 11 mineral material sites, covering over 560 acres. These sites produce such things as sand and gravel, boulders, and building stone.

According to BLM officials and maps of livestock grazing allotments, 74 allotments cover most of the 1.7 million acres of the monument, although not all acres within the allotments are suitable for livestock grazing. About 84 operators have permits for approximately 77,000 active animal unit months each year.⁴ Operators of some allotments have made improvements in the livestock grazing areas (e.g., they have built fences or installed water tanks).

Rights-of-way are also present within the monument. A right-of-way grant authorizes the use of public lands for such things as roads, power lines, telephone lines, and irrigation ditches. The 80 rights-of-way in the monument cover a total of about 7,800 acres. Also, as of April 1, 1997, 12 applications for rights-of-way were pending approval.

Other land-use authorizations include special and commercial recreation permits, which total about 50 annually. These permits are issued for the

³The President's proclamation and BLM's regulations provide that federal land within the monument may be exchanged for land outside the monument if such an exchange would protect the monument's values.

⁴An animal unit month is defined as the amount of forage needed to sustain one cow, one horse, or five sheep for 1 month.

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activities of outfitters and guides and for other uses such as wilderness training and the making of one or two films annually. BLM also issued about 430 wood-collection permits in 1996 for the area covered by the monument. Finally, other uses occur within the monument's boundaries that do not require authorization, including hunting, hiking, and other recreational activities.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We provided the Department of the Interior with a draft of this report for review and comment. In written comments, Interior agreed with our methodology and the data on the type and number of use authorizations.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

We obtained BLM's inventory lists of existing land-use authorizations for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument from officials in the agency's Utah State Office in Salt Lake City. According to State Office officials, the inventory lists were compiled by the officials responsible for managing the resources. At this office, we reviewed the case files for all mineral leases and mineral claims on the lists BLM provided.

We also reviewed files and interviewed officials in BLM's Kanab and Escalante resource area offices, as the monument's area is within both of these resource areas. At the resource area offices, we reviewed all available case files for livestock-grazing permits and allotments and special-use permits that BLM identified for the monument. In addition, we reviewed all available case files for rights-of-way that BLM identified for the monument. Most of these files were located in BLM's Cedar City District Office; the others were in the resource area offices.

Although our review did not ensure that BLM's inventories included all use authorizations for the monument, we discussed with BLM officials the methods of identifying existing use authorizations, and, where applicable, we reviewed computer-generated reports used in the process. We also verified that selected mineral leases and rights-of-way were identified on master title plat maps and that the information BLM provided was supported by information in the case files.

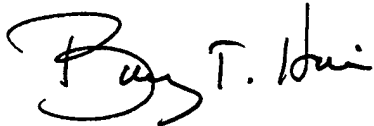
We performed our review in February and March 1997 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. As requested by your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report for 7 days. At that time, we will make copies

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available to the Secretary of the Interior and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

If you or your staff have any questions, please call me on (202) 512-9775. Major contributors to this report were Jennifer Duncan, Susan Iott, Sue Naiberk, and Victor Rezendes.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barry T. Hill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "B".

Barry T. Hill
Associate Director, Energy,
Resources, and Science Issues

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