

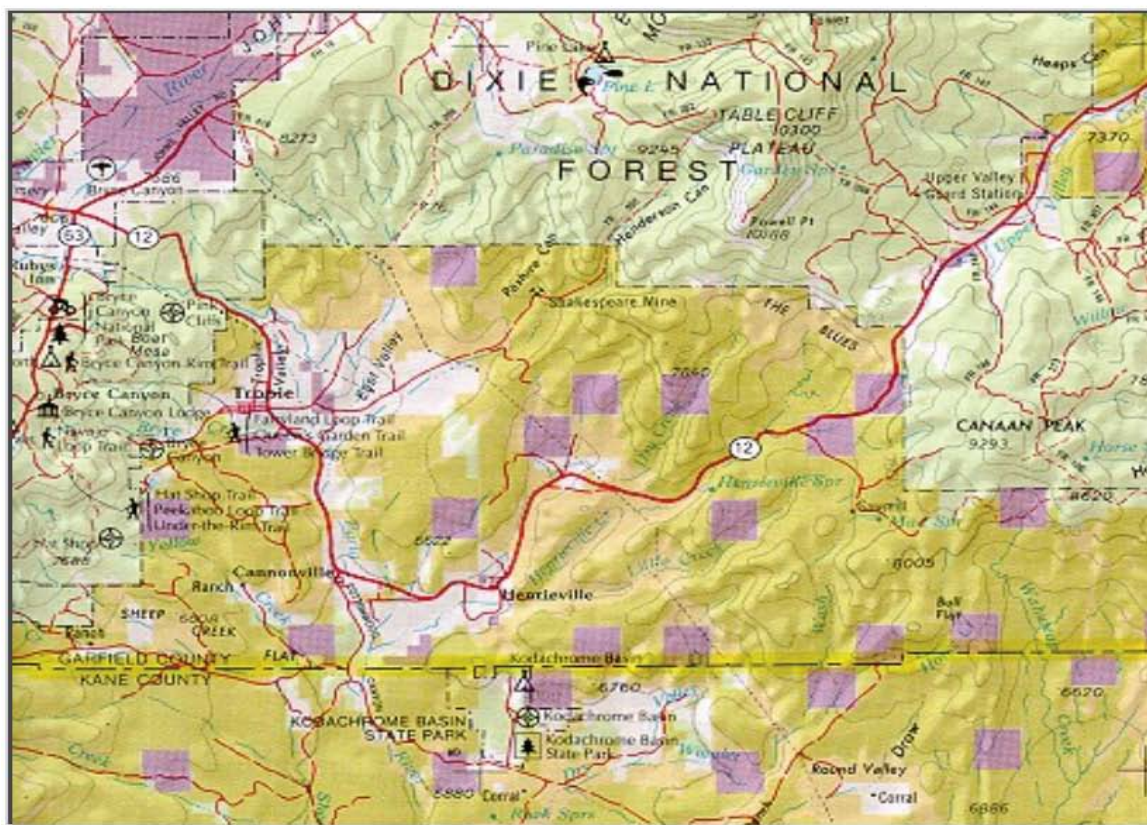
The GRAND PLAN (part 6 of 6)



An essay by [Ray Wheeler](#)

Fragmented land—Fractured Politics

If we include the Navajo and Hopi reservations in the category of public lands, somewhere upwards of 80 to 90 percent of the 130,000 square mile land base of the Colorado Plateau is publicly owned. But this ownership is fragmented among a host of governmental and bureaucratic jurisdictions.



1:250,000 scale map of portion of southern Utah showing Forest Service (green), BLM (yellow), and state-owned (blue) lands.

There are federal, state, Indian reservation, county and city-owned lands. "Inheld," one-mile-square "sections" of state land—deeded by the federal government to the states to provide a source of revenue for public schools—are scattered evenly across the federal lands, with a typical configuration of four state sections in each "township" of thirty-six sections of federal land. Management of federal land is in turn fragmented between a half dozen different federal agencies.

There are Forest Service, Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Defense and Department of Energy lands, installations and holdings. And within each agency there are a myriad of regional and subregional divisions.

Since the gargantuan industrial development proposals typical of the Plateau often cut across numerous jurisdictional boundary lines, the projects are highly vulnerable to political and bureaucratic gridlock and interminable delay. The gestation period for a major project can be 10 to 20 years. Interjurisdictional warfare has long been a way of life on the Colorado Plateau.

After a miraculously short courtship of just four years, six of the seven Colorado River basin states managed to hammer out the famous 1922 "Colorado River Compact", which divided between them water rights to the river's estimated annual flow. But the seventh basin state, Arizona, refused to ratify the compact, instead declaring legal and political war upon California. This particular civil war dragged on for *forty-four years* until it was finally resolved by a Supreme Court decision and the Colorado River Basin Project Act of 1968.

In the mid-1970's Utah's Kane and Garfield counties engaged in a bare-knuckled brawl over which county would play host to—and collect property tax revenues from—the proposed Kaiparowits Power Plant and the new town of 20,000 to house project employees.

Both tribal governments and federal agencies have had frequent skirmishes—and an occasional battle royale—with county governments. During the 1980's these tensions came to a head in the so-called "Sagebrush Rebellion", a proposal, championed primarily by county officials in Utah and Nevada, for the liquidation of all public lands of the West into private ownership. Similar proposals have been regularly advanced, every decade or two, by a timeless coalition of local entrepreneurs and multinational energy corporations. Western writer and historian Bernard Devoto was instrumental in beating off one such attempted raid on the public lands during the 1940's.

While the tactic has never come close to achieving its goal of ending federal land ownership, the *Great Dream*—to more fully exploit the Ultimate Resource—ensures that there will be continuing efforts to change federal land management policy on the Colorado Plateau.

- [Ray Wheeler](#)