

Walsh: Cache tries a costly road grab

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The sagebrush rebellion seems to have taken root in Cache County's alfalfa fields.

Under the cover of a Civil War-era mining law, the County Council has claimed 197 miles of horse trails and logging roads. And they plan to take over another 150 miles.

In a land of granola-munching cross-country skiers and dairy farmers, Cache County leaders are trying something even the statesmen of Kane and Garfield counties haven't - declaring all rutted forest paths their own.

"By law, they are [now] county roads," says Cory Yeates, a council member.

So begins a fruitless rhetorical standoff between another Utah county and the federal government. Inevitably, the case will wind up in court, with taxpayers footing the bill.

Under state law, "existing" roads are defined by 10 years of continuous use since 1976. In southern Utah, county leaders use and abuse that interpretation to keep national forests open to four-wheelers, ranchers and logging companies - doing their best to block wilderness designation in the process. But Cache County leaders may have a better historical claim to the roads than their neighbors to the south.

In the late 19th century, when the county was home to a young agricultural college and a green refuge for Mormon pioneers from Scandinavia, its mountains were overrun by sheep herds and crisscrossed by roads to Rich County and points beyond. Valley residents eventually pleaded with the U.S. Forest Service for help. In 1902, Department of Agriculture Inspector Albert Potter found livestock dying in streambeds and few trees larger than a sapling. Two years later, the Cache National Forest was created.

The hills east of Logan recovered. But the roads suffered in the process. Whether through benign neglect or deliberately delayed maintenance, many of the roads through the forest have been closed. Meantime, private property owners have cut off access to the forest through their land.

Many in the county are at the point of revolt, according to Thad Box, retired dean of Utah State University's College of Natural Resources. But they're not necessarily the anti-government partisans of southern Utah; they're practical. Old-timers just want to be able to get to a family picnic spot used for generations. Others want to drive a trailer up the canyon or run their thrill machines deep into the woods. "It's not a battle to get the livestock off the land or cut more timber. It's more about tradition," said Box.

This might all be resolved with money. The council and forest managers are trying to hammer out an agreement to allow the county to apply for federal funding to maintain and reopen the roads.

If that happens, this road grab could fade away and the County Council could spend its time and money on something more important - like a comprehensive strategy to cut down on wintertime air pollution, maybe?

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