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UTE INDIAN TRIBE PROTECTS UNCOMPAHGRE RESERVATION LANDS FROM ILLEGAL TRANSFER TO UTAH AND DEFEATS UNRESPONSIBLE OIL SHALE DEVELOPMENT

Ft. Duchesne, UT – October 19, 2023

More than five years ago, the Ute Indian Tribe began working to defeat an illegal transfer of Uncompahgre Reservation lands to the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA). In 2016 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposed transferring 440 acres of Uncompahgre Reservation lands to SITLA. SITLA then planned to use those lands to support the Enefit American Oil Shale Project (Enefit).

By 2019, the Ute Indian Tribe forced BLM to admit that it cannot transfer lands within the Uncompahgre Reservation to the State of Utah. As the Tribe made clear, under the Utah Enabling Act of 1894 and 43 U.S.C. § 851, BLM was prohibited from transferring these lands to SITLA. In Section 6 of the Utah Enabling Act, the people of Utah specifically agreed not to seek lands within any Indian reservation as a part of the public lands granted to the State in support of its schools. In addition, 43 U.S.C. § 851 prohibits the selection of “indemnity” lands by SITLA within an Indian reservation.

On August 8, 2023, in the face of growing opposition, Enefit finally cancelled the project and committed to reclaim existing ground disturbance. In addition to taking tribal lands, Enefit planned to strip mine about 9,000 acres of privately held land within the Uncompahgre Reservation and process up to 50,000 barrels of oil shale per day. The project would have had significant environmental and health impacts on the Tribe, its members, and the entire Uinta Basin. The project was predicted to use 10-million gallons of Green River water per day, increase ozone, reduce air quality, and result in mountains of spent ore.

The Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee commented, “The Ute Indian Tribe will fight to protect every acre of our tribal homelands. BLM, the State of Utah, SITLA, and private energy companies must work in partnership with the Tribe.” The Business Committee continued, “We are a responsible energy developer and we will not allow others to take our lands, use our water, and pollute our resources.”

The Ute Indian Tribe continues its efforts to seek trust restoration of its lands within the Uncompahgre Reservation. In 1948, the Secretary of the Interior illegally transferred management of the Tribe’s lands from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to BLM. Congress never took title to the Tribe’s lands and never authorized this administrative transfer. The Tribe calls on Secretary Deb Haaland, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Bryan Newland, and BLM Director Tracey Stone-Manning to take action to restore the Tribe’s homelands and end this dark chapter of American history.

About the Ute Indian Tribe - The Ute Indian Tribe resides on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in northeastern Utah. Three bands of Utes comprise the Ute Indian Tribe: the Whiteriver Band, the Uncompahgre Band and the Uintah Band. The Tribe has a membership of more than three thousand individuals, with over half living on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation. The Ute Indian Tribe operates its own tribal government and oversees approximately 1.3 million acres of trust land which contains significant oil and gas deposits. The Tribal Business Committee is the governing council of the Tribe.