

John Salazar Land Swap Controversy: Proposed Land Deal Would Benefit Billionaire Donor, Critics Say

by Kristen Wyatt • Aug. 17, 2010 • 2 min read • [original](#)

DENVER — A proposed land swap in western Colorado that would benefit a Florida billionaire who is a political donor to U.S. Rep. John Salazar has drawn intense opposition from hunters and fishermen, who claim the plan smells of political favoritism.

The strip of land along Deep Creek in Gunnison County would be off-limits to outdoorsmen if Congress approves the land swap with William Koch, whose holdings include a coal mine about 10 miles from the ranch. Koch's Oxbow Corp. is the largest political contributor to Rep. John Salazar, who sponsored the proposed swap.

Salazar's spokesman says the congressman was simply trying to help constituents when he proposed a resolution this year swapping some 1,846 acres currently under federal management in exchange for nearly 1,000 acres owned by Koch.

But area outdoorsmen question the swap for a deep-pocketed Salazar donor who wants the land to connect two huge parcels he owns into a bigger, closed-to-the-public ranch.

"This is some of the best elk-hunting land in the state, and for them to want to close it off, it's a crime," said John Caven, a 63-year-old plumber from Crawford who put an ad in his local paper rallying residents to oppose the measure in Congress.

Koch would give the government 911 acres in the Curecanti National Recreation Area, plus about 80 acres of private land within Dinosaur National Monument in Uintah County, Utah. If Congress approves the swap, a final appraisal would be done to ensure the government is getting a fair deal.

Federal lands managers raised several questions in a memo leaked by a U.S. Bureau of Land Management employee. It questioned whether the trade would be fair because it didn't take into account the land's "extremely high" potential for natural gas and coal development. The memo also notes the swap makes no provision to preserve the federally protected greenback cutthroat trout in Deep Creek.

BLM's spokesman in Colorado, Steven Hall, confirmed the memo's authenticity but said it was only a guidance document for the Department of Interior.

The National Park Service, which would manage the land Koch offered to swap, has backed the proposal.

Koch, who lives in West Palm Beach, refused to be interviewed for this story. His spokesman, Brad Goldstein, insisted that Koch doesn't want to develop gas or coal and only wants to create a contiguous ranch for his Kobe beef cattle without worrying about trespassers or poaching.

"There is nothing sinister. This kind of thing happens all the time," Goldstein said.

Koch, 70, is listed at No. 316 on Forbes' list of richest people with an estimated net worth of \$3 billion. He gives generously to political candidates. Koch and other Oxbow Corp. employees are Salazar's biggest contributors, giving him more than \$30,000 since 2007, according to [opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org).

Goldstein said Koch disputes the BLM's assertion that the land he wants has valuable mineral potential.

"There's been some concern this land would be developed. Nothing could be further from the truth," said Goldstein, adding Koch would be happy to see the resolution stipulate the land can't be mined or drilled.

The resolution introduced by Salazar is pending in both chambers of Congress and hasn't been scheduled for a hearing.

Salazar didn't respond to an interview request by The Associated Press. Wortman insisted the swap would benefit the public in part because the lands Koch would trade include habitat for vulnerable sage grouse,

Wortman pointed out the public could still use an access road to Gunnison National Forest. Gunnison County's commissioners have endorsed the swap.

"People in support of this far outweigh the opponents," Wortman said.

But some Delta County neighbors complain they've been left out of the conversation.

Ed Marston, president of the Paonia Chamber of Commerce and former publisher of High Country News, says the deal stinks.

"It takes away a huge stretch of access to Forest Service land, and gives us nothing over here in exchange," Marston said. "This man is one of the richest men in the country, and he's put together a beautiful ranch. I applaud him for it. But that's a different thing than asking for my land."

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