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National ethics group calls for investigation of Utah Rep. Mike Noel ‘for failing to disclose conflicts of interest’

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Utah Rep. Mike Noel’s apparent [failure to disclose significant land holdings](#) worth \$1.2 million near and in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument has prompted a formal ethics complaint and an inquisitive letter from a Democratic congressman to the Interior Department.

Last week, the environmental group [Western Values Project \(WVP\)](#) released an analysis showing the irrigated land Noel owns in Kane County’s Johnson Canyon poses a potential, yet undisclosed conflict of interest.

Noel’s legislative efforts to shrink the monument and win approval for the Lake Powell pipeline could benefit him personally, the group argued — but are not mentioned in legally required conflict-of-interest disclosures on file with the Utah Legislature.

The [Campaign for Accountability](#), a liberal ethics watchdog based in Washington, D.C., is now asking Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes to look into the matter. A complaint filed Tuesday accuses Noel of breaking state anti-nepotism laws and violating his fiduciary duty in his role as longtime executive director of the Kane County Water Conservancy District.

Noel continues to advocate for the costly pipeline project to carry Colorado River water from Lake Powell to 13 southern Utah communities including St. George — even though the state Division of Water Resources has concluded the Kane district’s groundwater supplies will meet its needs through 2060, according to the complaint sent to Reyes.

“Rep. Mike Noel has left no stone unturned in his decade long campaign to channel public money into his own pocket,” said Daniel Stevens, Campaign for Accountability’s executive director. “He’s paid his daughter to work for him, and he used taxpayer money to fix his son-in-law’s broken truck. Now he wants the public to fund a billion-dollar pipeline that would uniquely benefit his own ranch. The people of Utah deserve to know if one of their elected representatives is using their money for his own personal financial benefit.”

Noel did not respond to an email seeking comment, but last week he dismissed concerns about his land holdings as “fake news” and “BS,” suggesting he is being targeted by liberal groups because of his controversial stands on public lands.

But the flap spurred a Feb. 16 letter of inquiry to U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, asking whether the agency was ever informed of Noel's land holdings during the decision-making process behind the recent reduction of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., noted that Noel was deeply involved in that process.

"Rep. Noel's failure of transparency and the Interior Department's apparent failure to learn of this financial stake in a major policy decision have national consequences," wrote Grijalva, the ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee. "This episode needs to be remedied and cannot be repeated."

According to the Western Values Project's property analysis, one 40-acre parcel appears to have been carefully cut out of the monument under the reduction order signed by President Donald Trump on Dec. 4 at Zinke's recommendation.

Noel has told The Tribune he never asked for his property to be carved out and doubted he would benefit from the change.

At a gathering hosted Thursday by the advocacy group Foundation for Integrated Resource Management, Noel went on the attack but offered nothing to rebut the basic facts of WVP's claims.

Instead, he asserted that the Johnson Canyon land is owned by the Michael Noel and Sherry Noel Living Family Trust.

Available documents, however, indicate the parcels in question were transferred to Noel Properties LLC in 2012, where they remain. Neither the family trust nor Noel Properties LLC is listed on Noel's conflict-of-interest forms, filed with the Legislature over the past four years.

Noel has suggested he met the disclosure requirement by paying taxes on the properties, a claim WVP executive director Chris Saeger dismissed as "a joke."

"Facts are facts: Public records show this land is owned by a [limited-liability corporation] that Mike Noel did not disclose to the Legislature," he said. "The whole point of those disclosures is to reveal conflicts of interest, and not even Mike Noel should be above the law."

The disclosure forms ask lawmakers to list real property they own that could constitute a conflict of interest.

Noel's forms listed Flood Canyon Ranch, Lost Spring Gap Ranch and CMS Agriculture Ranch. He told The Tribune that Noel Properties, which is not mentioned on the forms, is the corporate name for Flood Canyon Ranch.