

***The Salt Lake Tribune***

Date: 12/05/2003 Edition: Final Section: Nation/World Page: A17

**Lieberman seeks surveys of disputed Utah roads**

By Robert Gehrke The Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- Presidential aspirant and Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman asked Interior Secretary Gale Norton to release information her department has gathered regarding road claims across federal lands in Utah.

Utah has submitted a series of claims to Utah roads and expects to make more under an agreement between Norton and former Gov. Mike Leavitt that establishes criteria and a process for the federal government to cede control of the roads to the state.

A 1993 Interior Department report to Congress identified 5,000 potential ownership claims under a Civil War-era mining law known as R.S. 2477.

"While I do not know which and how many claims were examined, it is very likely that at least some, or portions, of the areas for which you now contemplate surrendering claims . . . were examined by BLM staff," Lieberman wrote in his letter to Norton on Wednesday.

Making the information public would ensure that roads that do not meet the legal criteria under R.S. 2477 are not turned over to the state, he said.

When Norton and Leavitt made their deal in April they stated that the federal government would not consider granting road claims across national parks or wilderness areas, but left open the possibility of claims across the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

R.S. 2477 gave states and counties the right to roads that cross unreserved federal land. The provision was repealed in 1976 with the passage of the Federal Land Management Policy Act, but that act recognized the rights of states and counties to established rights of way.

That has created years of dispute and legal fights over what constitutes a road, because states may want to retain rights to the road, or because the roads may cross a national park or national forest, creating clashes over access to the road.

Identifying roads across areas being considered for wilderness designation would also disqualify the lands from protection.

"What is at stake is whether, by manipulating the standards for recognizing rights-of-way claims made under a repealed 1866 statute, the Department of the Interior effectively gives broad permission for the development of federal land -- even when the claims themselves may be flimsy and the damage to the environment caused by recognition of the claims profound," wrote Lieberman, senior Democrat on the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee.