

ASH'S ROLE NOTED IN LAND DEALINGS

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Federal Acreage Acquired
in Controversial Trade
NYTimes

ELKO, Nev., Dec 3 (AP)—President Nixon's new budget chief was one of several traders who acquired thousands of acres of public land in the west in a series of controversial deals with the Interior Department.

Roy L. Ash, named last week as director of the Office of Management and Budget, and his business partner, Charles B. Thornton, in 1969 exchanged 22 acres of ocean-front land in California for 14,145 acres of arid range land in Nevada.

The Ash-Thornton exchange was just one of several in the Interior Department's 10-year effort to acquire the land for Point Reyes National Seashore, across the Golden Gate from San Francisco.

Some Federal agencies disagreed over whether such trades were in the public interest.

Officials of the Bureau of Land Management said that, despite the huge disparity in size, the two parcels of land had the same monetary value.

Land Adjacent to Ranch

Mr. Ash and Mr. Thornton had bought land in Pt. Reyes just north of San Francisco for the purpose of trading it with government for acreage adjacent to the T Lazy S cattle ranch they owned in a remote section of northern Nevada near Elko.

The Government does not sell large parcels of public land, except to other governmental bodies. But such parcels sometimes are traded, usually for the purpose of consolidating holdings to make them easier to administer.

Mr. Ash and Mr. Thornton paid about \$6,500 an acre for the Point Reyes land and got the Nevada property for about \$10 an acre.

One Bureau of Real Management official in Nevada at the time defended the \$10-an-acre price saying that there was never any question in his mind as to the value.

"Ranchers are the market and they won't pay any more," he said. He said that land values had changed little in 25 years in that sparsely populated part of Nevada.

\$15-An-Acre Price

Less than a year after that a 240-acre tract in the same area sold for \$15 an acre, a price now considered about the lowest for which range land can be obtained.

Jerry Hendershot, realty specialist for the bureau, Elko district, said that ranch land throughout the area was currently selling for an average of \$25 to \$30 an acre.

Robert D. Morrow, land appraiser for the Forest Service office in Elko, said he doubted that much land had sold for as little as \$10 an acre anywhere in Nevada since 1964.

Papers filed in the Elko County Courthouse on Oct. 10, 1972, six weeks before his White House appointment, show that Mr. Ash sold his half-interest in the T Lazy S to Mr. Thornton for \$10 "and other good and valuable consideration."

The Other Consideration

The other consideration was never defined. Reached in Los Angeles, Mr. Ash said that, while he would have no particular objection to disclosing the payment he received for his interest in the 200,000-acre ranch, it would be something about which Mr. Thornton would also have to be consulted.

Mr. Ash said that he had been looking for a buyer for a couple of years and that the sale had nothing to do with his White House appointment.

Mr. Ash said at a news conference after his appointment was announced that he would resign his \$195,000-a-year job as president of Litton Industries, Inc., and would dispose of his \$3-million stock in Litton, which is involved in a \$270-million shipbuilding contract dispute with the Navy.

Acquisition Costs Soar

When Congress created the 55,000-acre Point Reyes Park in 1962 it authorized \$14-million to acquire the privately owned land in the area. But values skyrocketed and over the next decade land acquisition costs soared to \$57.5-million.

Congress grew restive over requests for more money for Point Reyes and the Interior Department became eager to find people interested in exchanging land within the park for Federal acreage elsewhere.

Stewart L. Udall, Interior Secretary at the time, recalled in an interview last year that land trades "seemed like a good idea at the time."

But looking back now at the disputes that surrounded almost every proposed trade, Mr.

Udall said, "Anyone in his right mind had to be uneasy about these exchanges. We came to the conclusion this was a very poor way to acquire the land."

The Ash-Thornton exchange, as described in Interior Department records, was typical of the way many of the trades were handled.

The two Southern California industrialists paid \$142,000 in late 1969 for six parcels totaling 22.09 acres in Point Reyes.

That land was placed in trust while they negotiated with the Federal Government for 14,145.6 acres adjacent to the T Lazy S. The deal went through on Dec. 5, 1969.