

Bentonite companies grab most of federal lands sold at bargain prices

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WASHINGTON — Nearly 30,000 acres of federal land in Wyoming have been sold to private owners in the last 12 years — at an average price of \$2.68 an acre, federal records show.

Applications are pending for the sale of an additional 10,000 acres at similar bargain prices, according to documents provided by the Wyoming office of the Bureau of Land Management. The sales are allowed by a 117-year-old federal mining law that sets land prices at no more than \$5 an acre.

Most of the land transfers in Wyoming involve bentonite deposits in the north-central part of the state. One bentonite producer, Dresser Industries, has obtained more than

11,000 acres of federal land since 1977, and has applications pending for another 3,870 acres, BLM documents show.

Other federal lands have been acquired for uranium millsites or uranium mines, and for deposits of marble, clay, and sand and gravel.

The land acquisitions are governed by the 1872 Mining Law, which allows any U.S. citizen to file a mining claim on federal lands. The law allows the claimholder to hold the claim indefinitely by performing as little as \$100 of development work annually.

If the claim is found to contain valuable mineral deposits, the claimholder can purchase the federal land — a process known as patenting the claim — for \$2.50 or \$5 an acre, depending on the type of mineral deposit. Patents can also be obtained for millsites.

Please see CLAIMS, A14

Bargain Prices For Federal Land

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