

'Sagebrush Rebels' Are Reveling in Reagan

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SALT LAKE CITY, Nov. 23 — Three years ago, five Western politicians and businessmen met here in a hotel room to plan strategy for gaining state control of the millions of acres of Federal land that lie west of the Rocky Mountains, land that is rich in timber, minerals and pastureland. Hardly anyone paid any attention then to their plans or to their complaints about Government bureaucracy, domination and mismanagement.

But the leaders of what eventually became known as the "sagebrush rebellion" kept pushing their cause, and with the election of Ronald Reagan, a Californian and self-proclaimed "sagebrush rebel," they have taken on new boldness and hope. This weekend, 500 Congressmen, state legislators, land-use experts and others from all over the West showed up for the rebellion's latest session.

"Because of the November election, it's a whole new ball game," State Assemblyman Dean A. Rhoads of Nevada said in a keynote address.

An Elevation of the West

That "ball game," to hear the public and private talk of the three-day conference, will include not only divestiture of the Federal lands but also new Western influence in Washington.

Participants at the conference tended to see Mr. Reagan's victory, as well as the coming Republican takeover in the Senate and the ascendancy of Westerners to a number of key Congressional posts, as an elevation of the West and its generally conservative politics to the proper place in the American order of things.

"The decade of the 80's will belong to the West," declared Senator Orrin G. Hatch of Utah, a leading Republican conservative and one of the early sagebrush rebels. The West's new political power, he said, will enable it "realistically" to seek divestiture of Federal lands through Congressional action rather than through the courts, which are "much less reliable," he asserted.

"Our ultimate success will depend upon Congressional action, but that's going to take time and a lot of educating of people back East," Mr. Hatch said. He noted that he already had submitted a divestiture bill; in fact, Representative James Santini of Nevada, outgoing chair-

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Senator Orrin G. Hatch

man of the Subcommittee on Mines and Mining, held a hearing on the matter yesterday at the conference.

'Count Me In'

The dominant figure at the conference's opening session was the President-elect. Although he was not physically present, he smiled benignly upon the participants from a bigger-than-life poster, on which he was quoted in large type as once saying, "Count me in as a rebel." Through a telegram, he sent "best wishes to all my fellow sagebrush rebels" and added: "I renew my pledge to work toward a sagebrush solution . . . to insure that the states have an equitable share of public lands and their natural resources."

One-third of the land area of the United

States, or 760 million acres, is directly under control of the Federal Government. Most of that land is west of the Rocky Mountains, where such states as Utah, Idaho and Nevada are at least two-thirds under Federal domination, dating back to when the states were formed and agreed to let the Federal Government oversee the largely uninhabited sections of the former territories.

The complaint of the rebels is that Washington has put too many restrictions on mining, ranching, timbering and water development on Federal land and that it is overseeing those restrictions incompetently at a time when Federal lands and their riches are pyramiding in value. By controlling so much territory, the rebels argue, the Federal Government is denying Western states the geographic and economic advantages held without question by other states.

Conference participants told of towns unable to expand, of tax bases too small to permit good government, of endless water squabbles and environmental red tape. One Nevadan, a resident of a county that is 98 percent under Federal control, said his town had been forced to ask Washington for space for a Little League baseball diamond. "It took two-and-a-half years to get approval of the permit," he added.

Calvin Black, chairman of the League for the Advancement of States Equal Rights, one of the sponsors of the conference here, denied accusations by opponents of divestiture, many of them environmentalists, that the sagebrush rebellion was nothing more than a land grab by big business, or "the last great buffalo hunt" as one Government supporter once put it. Other leaders of the rebellion promised that, if Federal divestiture did take place, Western states would not turn over their newly acquired land to private interests.

Several Western states, among them Nevada, Utah, Arizona and Wyoming, recently passed resolutions laying claim to Federal lands within their boundaries in the hope of forcing the Supreme Court to pass judgment on divestiture. Representatives of some of those states' legal offices were meeting in Arizona to discuss that question even as the conference here opened.

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