America's Red Rock Wilderness Act

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would add qualifying Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands in Utah to the National Wilderness Preservation System. This visionary legislation would protect iconic western landscapes with evocative names like Desolation Canyon, Cedar Mesa, and Labyrinth Canyon, as well as lands within the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The legislation was developed by citizen activists who exhaustively researched, field checked, and documented the wilderness proposal. There is no other landscape on earth like Utah's canyon country—and nowhere else in the lower 48 can such intact wilderness-quality desert lands be found. Unfortunately, this national treasure is currently threatened by rampant off-road vehicle use, inappropriate energy development and the legacy of Bush-era mismanagement.

National and Local Support

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act is supported by the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Wasatch Mountain Club, and more than 200 other national and local conservation groups, which together comprise the Utah Wilderness Coalition. The bill's sponsors, Rep. Rush Holt in the House and Sen. Dick Durbin in the Senate, are tireless champions of red rock country. In the 112th Congress, the bill received the bipartisan cosponsorship of 120 Representatives and 13 Senators. The details of the legislation are based on thousands of hours of volunteer fieldwork that grew out of a desire among Utah residents to preserve what was left of Utah's wild canyon country.

Activists in Denver show their support for protecting Utah's Greater Canyonlands Region as President Obama's motorcade drives by. © Terri Martin/SUWA.

Support for wilderness among Utahns remains robust. A 2013 poll conducted by the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project reports the following statistics on Utah voters:

- 71% believe national parks, forests, wildlife areas and monuments support the economy, provide recreation opportunities and enhance quality of life
- 52% say public lands are a job creator
- 63% describe themselves as conservationists
- 81% intend to visit a national park in 2013
- 66% go camping and hiking regularly

NRDC
The Earth's Best Defense

southern utah wilderness alliance

Sierra Club
Founded 1892

Wasatch Mountain Club

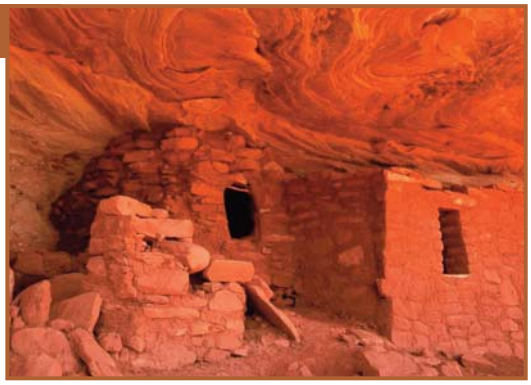
Desert bighorn sheep. © Rob Daugherty.

Biological Values

Utah's diverse landscape of rivers, rocky cliffs, sand dunes, grasslands, and forests shelters at least two dozen endangered or sensitive species, including unique relict plant communities and a large number of plants found nowhere else in the world. Wilderness designation helps protect these "at risk" species as well as animals that are sensitive to human disturbance. Many birds and mammals found in wilderness are intolerant of excessive human intrusion, especially during nesting, birthing, and denning times. Federal protection of Utah's remaining BLM wilderness can play a crucial role in safeguarding sensitive species and preserving Utah's unique biological heritage.

Archaeological Values

The Colorado Plateau contains one of the greatest concentrations of ancient cliff dwellings, granaries, and rock art in the world. America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would preserve much of Utah's prehistoric artifacts from damaging development while decreasing the risks of vandalism and looting. The Utah Professional Archaeological Council endorsed America's Red Rock Wilderness Act in 1995. According to the council, ". . . maintaining roadless areas is the largest and least costly deterrent to pothunting, inadvertent driving over sites, and vandalism." Representatives from the Hopi Tribe and the Navajo Tribe have urged the BLM to protect places of special significance included in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act.



Utah's wilderness lands shelter a treasure trove of prehistoric artifacts and cultural sites. © James Kay.

The outdoor industry contributes over $6 billion annually to Utah's economy. © Moab Area Travel Council.

Economic Values

Outdoor recreation ranks with financial services and healthcare as one of the three largest sectors of America's economy according to the Western Governors Association. A Grand County, Utah report found this was by far the largest sector of the local economy, providing 44 percent of non-government jobs in the area. The business community understands that wild and beautiful landscapes are essential to the local economy and draw a wealth of commerce to rural Utah. Ninety-two businesses including major outdoor equipment manufacturers and retailers, bed and breakfast and restaurant owners, guides and artists currently support America's Red Rock Wilderness Act because it protects the backcountry and thereby preserves the foundation of the regional economy.

Recreation Values

The ability of families to access America's public lands is well protected by America's Red Rock Wilderness Act because it ensures that the spectacular wild lands that exist today will still exist tomorrow. Under the Act, these scenic gems would be preserved in their natural state, providing opportunities for primitive recreation such as camping, hiking, canyoneering, hunting, fishing, river running, and horseback riding. An extensive network of routes would still be available for the 10 percent of visitors who participate in motorized recreation, and the proposed wilderness boundaries have been drawn so that popular bicycle trails such as the Slickrock Bike Trail near Moab would remain open to riders.

Utah's wild BLM lands provide outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation. ©Ray Bloxham/SUWA.

Threats to America's Red Rock Wilderness

Climate Change

Climate change has already impacted the ecological health of public lands throughout the West, resulting in shrinking and degraded water resources, larger and hotter wildfires, the spread of non-native plants, wildlife stress, habitat fragmentation, greater soil erosion, and dust storms that settle on higher-elevation snowpack, causing earlier, faster snowmelt. Activities that occur on public lands, including off-road vehicle recreation, road construction, oil and gas development, and grazing, exacerbate these changes. The best strategy for protecting our public lands and making them as resilient as possible to these effects is by preserving the integrity of undisturbed native landscapes such as those proposed for wilderness under America's Red Rock Wilderness Act.

Destructive Off-Road Vehicle Use

Off-road vehicle (ORV) use in Utah's canyon country is one of the most pervasive threats to this landscape. ORV use fragments wildlife habitat and degrades scarce desert streams, muddying and polluting water that is critical to the survival of over 80 percent of the area's wildlife species. Research also shows that ancient archaeological artifacts, including masonry room blocks, granaries, and rock art, are more likely to be vandalized or looted if an ORV route is located nearby. When the Bush administration finalized travel plans for public lands in eastern and southern Utah, it blanketed the area with over 20,000 miles of ORV routes—including 3,000 miles of routes in proposed wilderness (much of it recognized as wilderness-quality by the BLM itself). Many of these are nothing more than faded mining tracks, wildlife trails, streambeds, and canyon bottoms. Closing just a fraction of these unnecessary routes would preserve wilderness resources until Congress has a chance to permanently protect them through federal wilderness designation.

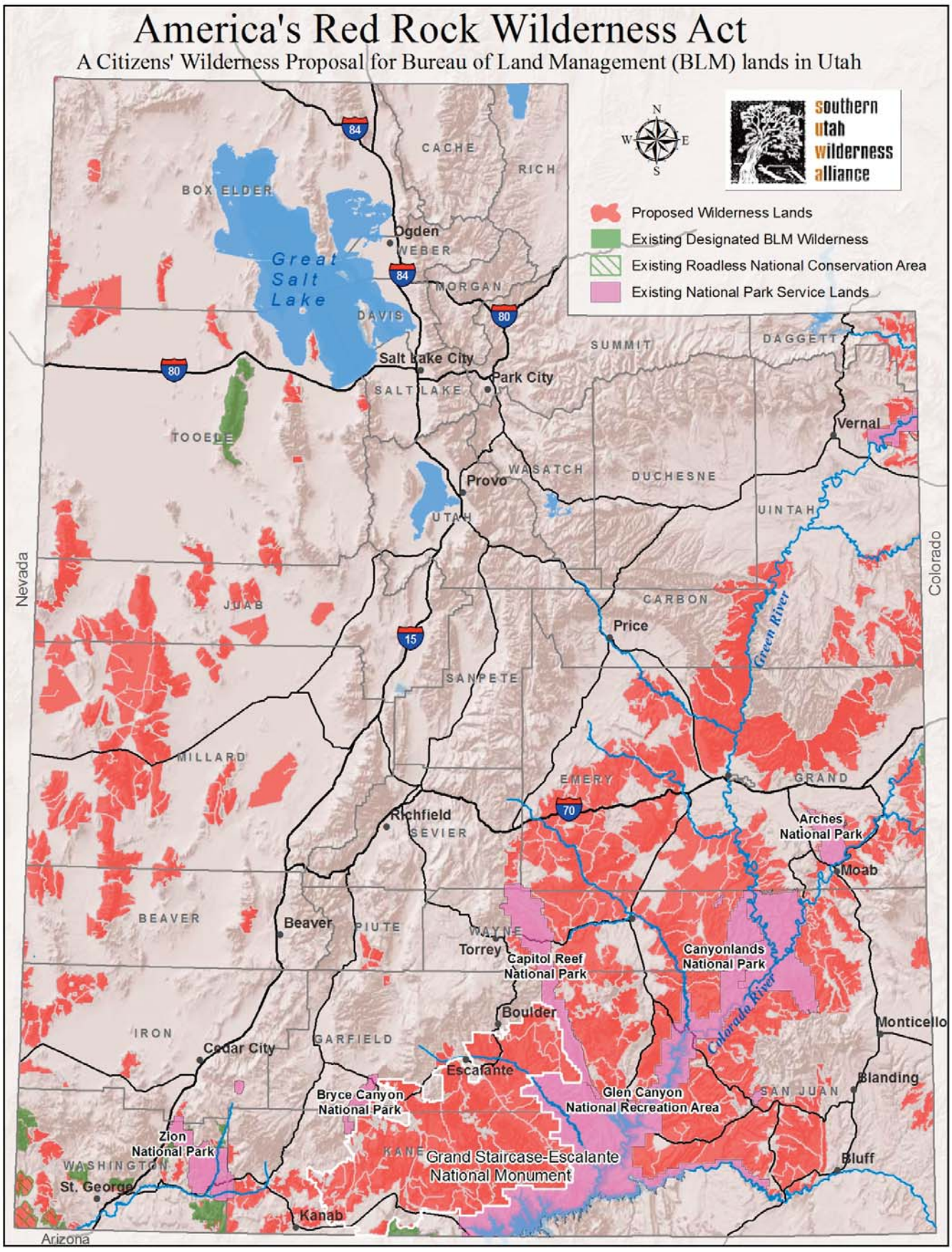
ORV use fragments wildlife habitat and degrades desert streams. © Liz Thomas/SUWA.

Oil and gas development mars the landscape just six miles from the boundary of Canyonlands National Park. © Liz Thomas.

Oil and Gas Leasing and Development

While the amount of "technically recoverable" oil and gas reserves on lands within America's Red Rock Wilderness Act is negligible—about twenty-three days of natural gas and roughly six days of oil at current national consumption levels—the threat to these lands from improper extraction is great. Proposals to develop tar sands for the first time in the U.S. have been approved in Utah and threaten to devour the landscape as we've seen happen in Alberta, Canada. In the meantime, the oil and gas industry has stockpiled more than 3.4 million acres of leased federal land in Utah that are not in development. With this kind of surplus, new leasing in proposed wilderness areas is clearly unnecessary. Indeed, several successful negotiations between conservationists and oil and gas companies have resulted in "win-win" agreements that have allowed drilling while minimizing impacts to proposed wilderness lands.

To cosponsor the bill, please contact Jasmine Hunt in Sen. Durbin's office (202-224-2152) or Chris Rackens in Rep. Holt's office (202-225-5801)



For additional information, please contact:

Jen Ujifusa - Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, 202.266.0473
Bobby McEnaney - Natural Resources Defense Council, 202.289.2429
Matt Kirby - Sierra Club, 202.548.4596