



# REDROCK

## W I L D E R N E S S

The Newsletter of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance  
VOLUME 40, NUMBER 3 • AUTUMN/WINTER 2023

**A MAJOR VICTORY FOR LABYRINTH CANYON!**



The mission of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) is the preservation of the outstanding wilderness at the heart of the Colorado Plateau, and the management of these lands in their natural state for the benefit of all Americans.

SUWA promotes local and national recognition of the region's unique character through research and public education; supports both administrative and legislative initiatives to permanently protect Colorado Plateau wild places within the National Park and National Wilderness Preservation Systems or by other protective designations where appropriate; builds support for such initiatives on both the local and national level; and provides leadership within the conservation movement through uncompromising advocacy for wilderness preservation.

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## AMERICA'S RED ROCK WILDERNESS ACT REFERENCE MAP

This issue of *Redrock Wilderness* was written by the following staff and outside contributors: Steve Bloch, Ray Bloxham, Judi Brawer, Travis Hammill, Joyelle Hatch, Diane Kelly, Hanna Larsen, Jeremy Lynch, Kya Marienfeld, Landon Newell, Laura Peterson, and Michelle White. It was edited by Darrell Knuffke and laid out by Diane Kelly. Newsletter design by Amy Westberg.

Contributions of photographs (especially of areas within the citizens' proposal for Utah wilderness) and original art (such as pen-and-ink sketches) are greatly appreciated! Please send submissions to [photos@suwa.org](mailto:photos@suwa.org) or via regular mail c/o Editor, SUWA, 425 East 100 South, Salt Lake City, UT 84111.

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## PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

Fall in canyon country is a lavish gift. Last weekend, I immersed myself in it for a time. The desert skies around Moab are empty of turkey vultures. They migrated south weeks ago, the hummingbirds with them. The nights are sweater-cool but the days still bring balmy autumn afternoons. Snow has begun to paint the mountains.

And then there are the trees. I love autumn aspen as much as anyone, but for pure, glorious spectacle few things match a stand of outrageously gold cottonwood trees arrayed against the towering red cliffs of southern Utah. As the seasons change, so do the landscapes we love. What does not change, though, is our commitment to the preservation of these magnificent redrock canyons. It remains unwavering.

Perseverance is the parent of progress. And this issue's lead story on Labyrinth Canyon blends the two.

Consider the change over the past 35 years in the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) handling of motorized recreation in the Moab area. "Management" was a wildly euphemistic term in those days for what was really a free-for-all. For example, the agency released its first motorized travel plan for the Moab area (including Labyrinth Canyon) in 1985. The plan effectively opened 1,750,000 acres to cross-country travel by off-road vehicles. Off-road vehicle (ORV) users could ride anywhere they damn well pleased, regardless of the damage. And they damn well did. This is the where, when, and why of SUWA's first steps to achieve some balance.

We applied pressure everywhere we could (including an unsuccessful trip to the U.S. Supreme Court). In 2008, the BLM limited ORVs to designated routes in almost all of our wilderness proposal. That put an end to legal cross-country travel. And it was progress, though the plans remained deeply flawed: the agency designated nearly every route ORV users demanded. It was the bureaucratic exaction of a pound (or ton) of flesh. So we challenged the plans in court.

It took another decade of skirmishes before we were able to resolve that litigation with settlement agreements in 2017. Those agreements also triggered the continuing revision of 11 additional travel management plans. That gave us a once-in-a-generation chance to bring genuine balance to ORV use.

One of the greatest opportunities was for the Green River as it flows through Labyrinth Canyon.

As the BLM began to plan travel management for the area, which the settlement required, a steady parade of activists, commercial river companies, the Grand County Commission, and SUWA staff pressed the BLM to protect this placid stretch of the Green River. And as Laura Peterson writes in this issue (see page 6), the BLM's just-released plan largely returns peace to the canyon.

This story is one we can tell over and over. Thirty-five years ago, the BLM's Moab field office manager, at a toe-to-toe meeting in the summer heat, angrily declared that we would never see one acre more of wilderness in Utah beyond the 1.9 million acres the Utah BLM recommended in its pitiful inventory.

He was wrong. Members like you made SUWA stronger and stronger. We slowly turned the BLM away from its outright anti-wilderness bias. Under the guidance of former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, the agency began the long, slow process of correcting its awful inventories of the 1980s. That process continues today.

With fits and starts, and plenty of wrangling by SUWA, our members and our friends, the new inventories showed what we always knew: that our wilderness proposal, as encapsulated in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, truly represents the remaining wilderness in Utah's piece of the Colorado Plateau. There are over nine million acres of wilderness across the state, not fewer than two.

Twenty-five years ago, former Utah Representative Jim Hansen warned us that we'd better accept his bill to designate just 1.4 million acres of BLM land across the entire state as wilderness while releasing over 1.5 million acres from protection. He said we'd never get a better deal.

He was wrong. We continued to fight for the integrity of the lands Rep. Hansen wanted to deprive of even interim protection. And we've gained some form of protection for over 5.5 million acres.

Just five years ago, at a spot above Eagle Canyon in the San Rafael Swell, Utah Representative John Curtis played to an audience of local politicians. He told us we had no choice but to get into his "box." That's what he called his wilderness proposal for the San Rafael Swell and Labyrinth Canyon. The bill contained too little wilderness and too many anti-wilderness provisions.

He was wrong. With our opposition, his bill died in the Republican-controlled House without a vote. Senator Dick Durbin stepped in to clean up the Senate version and to add significant acreage to protect places like Labyrinth Canyon and Muddy Creek. With land exchanges, and despite Mr. Curtis's claims, we will end up protecting around 750,000 acres as wilderness.

These are but a few of the many times that Utah power brokers have told Utah wilderness activists that their only choice was capitulation. You and your devoted activism proved them wrong repeatedly.

This year is our 40th anniversary, a good time to consider the progress we've made. And the answer is we've made gains beyond the imagination of the handful of folks who started this movement four decades ago.

We still face serious challenges from climate change, the Mad-Max character of modern off-road vehicles, and Utah's entrenched politicians. But perseverance and a steady and unwavering commitment to our mission, empowers us to continue to push forward, even when faced with trials or setbacks.

We cannot do this without you. Thank you for your steadfast dedication to the Redrock, for your support, and for being part of this movement.

For the Redrock,



Scott Groene  
Executive Director

**GOOD  
NEWS**

## NEW BLM TRAVEL PLAN PROTECTS SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF LABYRINTH CANYON

The fight to protect public lands in Utah can be as bumpy and uneven as the terrain itself. The long struggle to protect Labyrinth Canyon is evidence of that. But the Labyrinth Canyon example also provides evidence that progress is possible when enough good people put their backs and hearts into the effort.

On September 28th, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) finalized its motorized travel plan for the Labyrinth Canyon/Gemini Bridges area outside of Moab. The BLM's plan is a huge victory for land protection. It is a victory more than 40 years in the making. This plan finally strikes a balance between motorized and non-motorized recreation. Importantly, it closed the off-road vehicle (ORV) routes that most significantly harmed this beloved canyon. Best of all, the plan protects the quiet, solitude, and wildness of this incredible place.

Nestled in the heart of redrock country, Labyrinth Canyon is a gem of the American West. Nearly 50 miles of the placid Green River flow through towering redrock canyons. This sublime stretch of river provides a multi-day flatwater

river experience that is suitable for families and boaters of all experience levels. Labyrinth and its many side canyons, including Ten Mile, Hell Roaring, Spring, and Mineral encompass rare desert riparian areas, irreplaceable cultural sites, and significant wildlife habitat.

### A WILDERNESS OUTING TO REMEMBER

Since its founding, SUWA has been fighting to protect Labyrinth Canyon. When Utah Representative Wayne Owens first introduced America's Red Rock Wilderness Act in 1989, he brought congressional colleagues to Utah to give them a taste of its incredible wild lands. The Utah Wilderness Coalition, with the help of local outfitter Dee Holladay and Holiday Expeditions, organized a canoe trip down Labyrinth Canyon for a dozen members of Congress. It was an eventful trip that included a torrential downpour and a hurried, middle-of-the-night tent relocation to higher ground, away from a swollen river that swept away entire cottonwood trees. Despite the unexpected excitement, those members of Congress, like so many before and after them, fell in love with this special place.



THE BLM'S TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE LABYRINTH CANYON AND GEMINI BRIDGES AREA IS A HUGE VICTORY MORE THAN 40 YEARS IN THE MAKING. © JOSHUA LADAU



More than 4,500 SUWA members and supporters asked the agency to preserve for future generations a fragile and vitally important riparian ecosystem, to protect irreplaceable cultural sites, to enhance wildlife habitat, and to save precious wilderness.

In the ensuing years, SUWA has worked tirelessly to protect the canyon. We fought short-sighted oil and gas leasing in the greater Labyrinth area, including leases the State of Utah proposed to sell beneath the bed of the Green River itself. We challenged oil and gas drilling and pipeline projects in the area, ultimately limiting their development. While a wide range of activities has imperiled Labyrinth Canyon, proliferation of ORVs has posed the most enduring threat. And over the years, the BLM has consistently failed in its duty to prevent damage from motorized vehicles.

## OUT OF CONTROL MOTORIZED USE

In 1985, the BLM released a management plan for the Moab area, including Labyrinth Canyon. That plan opened virtually all of the Labyrinth landscape to cross-country ORV use, allowing vehicles to drive virtually anywhere, regardless of the harm to resources.

In response to the widespread damage cross-country ORV use caused, SUWA filed a statewide lawsuit in 1999 challenging the BLM's failure to manage ORV use in Moab and beyond. The case made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which eventually rejected it on procedural grounds. But the lawsuit prodded the BLM to change its policies about when and where motorized use is appropriate. New travel plans began to restrict motorized vehicles to routes specifically dedicated to that use.

Despite hopeful changes, the agency still failed to control ORV use. In the waning days of the George W. Bush administration, the BLM released six resource management plans that smothered eastern and southern Utah with more than 30,000 miles of ORV routes. In the Labyrinth Canyon area, the agency designated roughly 1,200 miles of dirt roads and trails, including routes in riparian areas; fading, rarely used two-tracks; and an eight-mile route in the canyon bottom along the Green River. The dense network of routes made it nearly impossible to escape the sight and sound of ORVs.



THE LABYRINTH CANYON STRETCH OF THE GREEN RIVER OFFERS A SUBLIME MULTI-DAY FLATWATER RIVER EXPERIENCE FOR BOATERS OF ALL EXPERIENCE LEVELS. © JAMES KAY

SUWA and a coalition of conservation organizations challenged the six resource management plans, including the Moab plan. In 2013, a federal court found that those Bush-era travel plans violated the law by failing to minimize impacts to natural and cultural resources. The ensuing settlement agreement between the BLM, SUWA and our partners, and ORV groups, required the agency to rewrite travel plans with more than just motorized users in mind.

## CHANGING TIMES

Events in 2019 were a game changer: Congress designated the west side of Labyrinth Canyon as wilderness and the river corridor itself as a scenic river under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The east side of the canyon, however, remains unprotected. As a result, the quiet and solitude abundant along one shore is often shattered by the noise and dust of ORVs racing along the other riverbank, up and down side canyons, and along canyon rims. Vehicle tracks continue to cut through riparian vegetation and spread out across the riverbanks.

In the decades of fighting ORV mismanagement in Utah, the conditions have changed. ORV use has exploded. There are now more than 200,000 ORVs registered in Utah; thousands more are trailered in from out of state every weekend. Plodding jeeps have given way to dirt bikes and the now-ubiquitous “side-by-sides.” These vehicles are faster,

louder, and more capable of penetrating deep into remote areas than ever before.

## A NEW OPPORTUNITY

Those who cherish this stretch of river applauded the idea of a new Labyrinth Canyon travel plan. It offered the BLM the chance to correct decades of mismanagement and harmonize land management on both sides of the Green River.

Throughout the BLM's multiple public comment periods for the Labyrinth Canyon/Gemini Bridges travel plan, public land lovers called on the agency to get motorized use under control. River guides and outfitters in Moab highlighted the unique visitor experience that floating this section of the Green River provides. River runners from around the country recounted their experiences floating the canyon, including the jarring sounds of ORVs that can reverberate off rock walls and carry for miles. Even the Grand County Commission asked the BLM for more balanced management (Grand County encompasses the planning area). More than 4,500 SUWA members and supporters asked the agency to preserve for future generations a fragile and vitally important riparian ecosystem, to protect irreplaceable cultural sites, to enhance wildlife habitat, and to save precious wilderness.

The BLM's new travel plan does just that. It closes routes in side canyons where ORVs have caused well-documented damage to cultural sites and riparian habitat. It closes the route stretching eight miles along the Green River itself.

The plan also removes unnecessary and redundant routes throughout the planning area to reduce some of the overwhelming impacts from motorized use.

The plan maintains motorized access to the Green River. It maintains access to spectacular overlooks. It maintains access to trailheads and recreation opportunities. But it also allows the countless hikers, river runners, climbers, canyoneers, campers, and nature lovers to experience this area away from the sight and sound of ORVs. It strikes a thoughtful balance between motorized and non-motorized recreation while also protecting precious natural resources. In short, it's a motorized travel plan that finally does justice to this incredible landscape.

## THE FIGHT CONTINUES

As with all public land fights in Utah, success requires continued vigilance and persistence. Unhappy with having only 800 miles of motorized vehicle routes in the Labyrinth area and thousands more in the greater Moab area, several ORV groups and the State of Utah have appealed the BLM's balanced decision to the Interior Board of Land Appeals. SUWA has intervened in that appeal to defend the BLM's decision.

Precisely because the path to land protection can be rocky and arduous, it's important to rejoice in the wins. Today, we celebrate the protection of Labyrinth Canyon. Tomorrow, we continue the fight to ensure that this protection endures.

—*Laura Peterson*

## UPCOMING TRAVEL PLANS

Though the Labyrinth Canyon plan is across the finish line, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) must still complete eight more travel plans in Utah over the coming years, covering more than 5 million acres. Just as was the case in Labyrinth, these plans are critical in determining where motorized vehicles are—and are not—allowed to travel in some of Utah's most remote and spectacular redrock country.

In the next year, the BLM will be working on a plan for the greater San Rafael Swell. That plan encompasses newly-designated wilderness areas as well as the San Rafael Swell Recreation Area. Outside of Utah's national monuments, the Swell is one of the most well-loved areas of Utah's backcountry. The agency also anticipates completing a travel plan for the Henry Mountains and Fremont Gorge area. Reaching from Capitol Reef National Park on the west to the Dirty Devil River and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area on the east, this varied landscape includes stunning alpine peaks, narrow redrock canyons, and the moon-like badlands.

Thoughtful travel planning in both areas will be critical to ensuring their preservation. And public input on these plans will be every bit as crucial as it was with the Labyrinth plan. Stay tuned for more information on how to get involved.



GOOD NEWS

## CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR RED ROCK BILL CONTINUES TO GROW

With help from SUWA's DC-based staff, activists from around the country have been meeting with congressional offices to build support for America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (H.R.3031 / S.1310), a bill that would designate more than eight million acres of wild public land in Utah as permanently protected wilderness.

We're pleased to report that their efforts are paying off! Since our last update, 16 House members have officially endorsed the bill, bringing us to 80 cosponsors in that chamber (the Senate total stands at 22). Those new cosponsors are: Becca Balint (VT-At Large); Salud Carbajal (CA-24); Dwight Evans (PA-3); Chuy Garcia (IL-4); James Himes (CT-4); Val

Hoyle (OR-4); Sara Jacobs (CA-51); Rick Larsen (WA-2); Mike Levin (CA-49); Ted Lieu (CA-36); Zoe Lofgren (CA-18); Doris Matsui (CA-7); Delia Ramirez (IL-3); Bobby Scott (VA-3); Kim Schrier (WA-8); and Jill Tokuda (HI-2).

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act enables us to promote our vision for wilderness preservation in Utah. With each new cosponsor, we gain another ally to help fend off legislative or administrative threats to Utah's canyon country.

As the climate crisis disrupts both natural ecosystems and human communities, protecting large expanses of public land from fossil fuel develop-

ment, off-road vehicle damage, and other human impacts is increasingly vital. Wilderness designation will help preserve important wildlife habitat, increase carbon storage, and boost climate resiliency while helping protect the region's abundant cultural resources.

Your advocacy drives congressional support for America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. Please contact your representatives today and urge them to become cosponsors (or thank them if they already have). Take action by visiting [suwa.org/cosponsor](https://suwa.org/cosponsor) or text ARROW to 52886. See page 10 for the full list of current cosponsors.

—Travis Hammill

## HOUSE REPUBLICANS GUT INTERIOR DEPARTMENT FUNDING

The House Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2024 was voted through the House on Friday, November 8th in a mostly party line vote. This annual legislation is the funding bill for the entirety of the Department of the Interior, including agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

This Congress, the Republican House Majority included riders and amendments that would require the BLM to withdraw the Conservation and Landscape Health rule (also referred to as the Public Lands Rule), prevent funds from being used to fully manage the restored Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, slash funding for national parks, promote dirty energy by requiring fossil fuels

lease sales while prohibiting growth in clean energy projects, and gut funding for programs in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

Once again, House Republicans are unserious about funding the government in a timely manner, choosing instead to govern by continuing resolution and crisis.

SUWA signed a coalition letter opposing the House Interior Appropriations bill as a whole as well as a letter opposing the poison pill amendments to the bill on the day of the vote. Additionally, the Biden administration has threatened to veto this bill as it stands, and both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate have signaled that the bill is dead-on-arrival.

House Natural Resources Committee Ranking Member Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) led the charge on an amendment to strip the poison pills out of the Interior Appropriations bill. SUWA, along with many other organizations, rallied support for the amendment on Capitol Hill to gain more than 30 congressional cosponsors, a strong showing. The amendment was not ruled in order by the rules committee. We are grateful for the strong support from these members of Congress, including America's Red Rock Wilderness Act sponsor Rep. Melanie Stansbury (D-NM), in opposing this terrible bill.

—Travis Hammill

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If any of your legislators are on this list, please  
take a moment to thank them by texting  
ARRWA to 52886!

Learn more about America's Red Rock  
Wilderness Act at [suwa.org/arrwa](https://suwa.org/arrwa).

## DRAFT PLAN RELEASED FOR RESTORED GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Since beginning the process of developing a new long-term management plan for the now-restored Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument last year, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is more than halfway done. The agency released a draft version of this new plan in August, with four “alternatives” for the public to consider.

Although the BLM’s preferred alternative (Alternative C) doesn’t quite hit all the marks in comparison to the original monument plan that directed science-first, holistic ecosystem management for over 20 years, the new draft plan still lays out significant improvements and a workable path toward protecting and restoring this incredible landscape-scale monument for decades to come. Our comments, which we submitted just prior to publication of this newsletter, highlight the good and the bad in the draft plan, and provide science, research, and historical perspective to assist land managers in choosing plan components that do the very best for this special place.

Some great things in the new draft plan’s preferred alternative include a return to a “zoned management approach.”

This approach divides areas of the monument into four zones and fits all future specific management decisions into each as deemed appropriate. For example, a wilderness-quality experience in some zones, a largely natural visitor experience in others, and room in frontcountry locations for future developed recreation sites or facilities like campgrounds, parking, and toilets if needed to better manage visitation and protect resources. The preferred alternative also includes a significant new commitment to protecting ancestral landscapes and cultural resources, to working with Tribes in management decisions, and to preserving traditional uses.

So what could be better? We are concerned that the draft’s preferred alternative fails to adequately protect lands with wilderness characteristics and imposes very few limits on mechanical vegetation removal—leaving relict vegetation and ancient pinyon-juniper woodlands (both highlighted as monument “objects” in its establishment) at risk. We would also like to see stronger proactive management rules for aircraft takeoffs, landings, and overflights, including helicopters and drones. Such uses can and do significantly



THANK YOU TO ALL OUR MEMBERS AND ACTIVISTS WHO ATTENDED PUBLIC MEETINGS, PROVIDED COMMENTS, AND ARE HELPING TO ENSURE THAT WE END UP WITH A STRONG, FORWARD-THINKING PLAN FOR GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT. © TOM TILL

impair the visual resources, soils, wildlife habitat, and some of the deepest natural quiet left to be found anywhere in the world.

Thank you to all our members and activists who attended public meetings, provided comments, and are helping to ensure that we end up with a strong, forward-thinking plan that is firmly rooted in science and conservation-based management. We couldn't do this without you!

—*Kya Marienfeld*

## LITIGATION CONTINUES OVER MONUMENT RESTORATIONS

Last year, several plaintiffs led by the State of Utah and the BlueRibbon Coalition (an off-road vehicle advocacy group) challenged President Biden's restoration of Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears National Monuments. SUWA and a coalition of conservation partners successfully intervened in these cases to defend the monuments. Four Tribal Nations have also intervened to defend Bears Ears National Monument.

The plaintiffs make many of the same tired arguments that federal courts have rejected for more than 100 years: they believe the monuments are “too big” and protect things

they shouldn't (like ecosystems and unique flora and fauna). In a new twist, the plaintiffs argue that the 1906 Antiquities Act—the statute by which Congress authorized presidents to establish national monuments—runs afoul of legal doctrines the current Supreme Court has established and embraced as a way to curb presidential power. Fortunately, the lawsuits had barely left the starting gate when a federal district court judge in Utah dismissed them outright. Undeterred, the state and other plaintiffs quickly appealed that decision to the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals.

The parties will file legal briefs over the coming months and we expect the court will hold oral argument next spring. In an interesting turn of events, several amicus (friend of the court) briefs have been filed on behalf of the plaintiffs, including one by a group of U.S. Senators, others by Arizona state legislators and a right-wing think tank. We also expect amicus briefs to be filed on behalf of the monuments by Grand Staircase-Escalante Partners, Utah Diné Bikéyah, the American Anthropological Association and others, all groups with a longstanding interest in protecting these places and their remarkable resources.

The good news is that the monuments remain in place, their unique and irreplaceable resources safe from things like hard rock mining and irresponsible motorized vehicle use while the Bureau of Land Management prepares new plans to guide their management for decades to come.

—*Steve Bloch*



CIRCLE CLIFFS IN GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT. © JAMES KAY



TRUMP-ERA LEASES THREATEN SCENIC WILD LANDS IN THE WHITE RIVER AREA AS WELL AS IMPORTANT HABITAT FOR THE IMPERILED GREATER SAGE-GROUSE AND SEVERAL PLANT SPECIES. © RAY BLOXHAM/SUWA

## SUWA ASKS FEDERAL COURT TO REVOKE TRUMP-ERA OIL & GAS LEASES IN BOOK CLIFFS, UINTA BASIN

In November, SUWA filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging four Trump-era oil and gas leasing decisions. The lawsuit involves 145 leases encompassing more than 225,000 acres of public land, primarily in eastern Utah's Book Cliffs and Uinta Basin regions. With the suit, SUWA seeks to protect some of Utah's wildest public land, including important habitat for the imperiled greater sage-grouse as well as Graham's and White River beardtongue (flowering plants). Many of the leases are near the White River, a remote and scenic tributary to the Green River which cuts a rugged path into the high desert plains of the Uinta Basin.

The challenged leasing decisions were approved during the Trump administration, pursuant to its ill-conceived "energy dominance" agenda. That agenda entailed leasing as much public land as possible for oil and gas development, as quickly as possible, and with as little public involvement and environmental analysis as possible. Not surprisingly, federal courts have consistently held those rushed and poorly analyzed decisions to be unlawful.

The Biden administration inherited an environmental and legal mess. Over the past three years it has revoked and

rescinded all aspects of the Trump administration's "energy dominance" agenda as contrary to federal laws and principles of informed decision-making. Additionally, in its own report, the Interior Department has recognized that the oil and gas program under which the BLM sold and issued the leases involved in this lawsuit "fail[ed] to provide a fair return to taxpayers . . . inadequately account[ed] for environmental harms to lands, waters, and other resources . . . [and] foster[ed] speculation by oil and gas companies to the detriment of competition and American consumers."

Development of these leases is not in the public interest. The climate crisis has arrived and the extinction crisis is worsening. Both are driven in large part by the BLM's oil and gas program. If we are to avoid the worst consequences of a rapidly changing climate, we must quickly transition away from fossil fuel leasing and development. To that end, SUWA's lawsuit asks the court to vacate the BLM's leasing decisions and to prohibit the agency from approving future oil and gas development on those leases. Stay tuned for updates.

—Landon Newell

## POTASH PROJECT THREATENS MIGRATORY BIRDS, WILDERNESS

For over a decade, SUWA has fought the stop-and-go plans of Peak Minerals, Inc. to mine the entire bed of Sevier Lake for potassium sulfate, commonly known as potash. Now we have filed suit in federal court to block it.

Nestled in between the Cricket Mountain and Red Canyon proposed wilderness areas to the east and the Notch Peak Wilderness Study Area and Red Tops and Black Hills proposed wilderness areas to the west, the 125,000-acre Sevier Lake is located in a remote and largely undisturbed basin in the West Desert.

Like so much of this seldom visited part of the state, the greater Sevier Lake area is currently devoid of light and noise pollution. And like the Great Salt Lake, Sevier Lake is a highly saline terminal lake (sometimes dry) that is a remnant of the ancient Lake Bonneville. During wet years, when Sevier Lake contains surface waters, it supports important stop-over habitat for the millions of migratory birds in the Pacific Flyway that go on to breed at the Great Salt Lake.

In 2011, over SUWA's objections, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) leased virtually the entire lakebed to Peak Minerals. SUWA appealed that decision but didn't

prevail. Then in 2019, again over our objections and based on a legally-flawed environmental analysis, the BLM granted authorizations and rights-of-way allowing Peak Minerals to develop the so-called "Sevier Playa Project."

This decision authorized the full-blown industrialization of the lakebed—including construction of evaporation ponds, dikes, roads, powerlines, a processing plant, and a rail load-out facility—without sufficient analysis of the impacts to migratory birds and other wildlife, water quantity and quality, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, visual resources, and wilderness qualities.

Due to dwindling potash prices and Peak Minerals' financial struggles, very little progress has been made toward actually developing the Sevier Playa Project . . . until now. While it had seemed like the project might recede into the sunset of bad ideas, we recently learned that the company obtained a \$30 million loan to jumpstart development on the lakebed as early as spring 2024. And in September, Peak Minerals submitted an amended mining plan to the BLM that would drastically extend the life of the project and expand the type and quantities of products produced far beyond what was approved in 2019.

In response, SUWA has gone to federal court to challenge the BLM's decision to allow this project in one of the most isolated and serene areas of Utah's West Desert. Stay tuned for updates as this litigation progresses.

—*Hanna Larsen*



THE SEVIER LAKE PLAYA AND CRICKET MOUNTAIN PROPOSED WILDERNESS. IN WET YEARS, THE LAKE PROVIDES IMPORTANT STOP-OVER HABITAT FOR THE MILLIONS OF MIGRATORY BIRDS IN THE PACIFIC FLYWAY THAT GO ON TO BREED AT THE GREAT SALT LAKE. ADOBE STOCK PHOTO

## BLM TAKES LACKLUSTER FIRST STEP TO ADDRESS RECREATION IMPACTS

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recently took a first step in addressing the explosive growth in human-powered recreation on public lands. Its “Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation” is a strategic document intended to guide recreation management across the 245 million acres of public lands the BLM manages.

Specifically, the Blueprint is “intended to guide investments, partnerships, outreach, and program development to respond to current demand and chart a course to meet future needs.” Unfortunately, it offers little change from previous strategic plans that have led to the current, untenable situation.

SUWA supports the Blueprint’s vision of transforming the BLM’s recreation program to increase and diversify funding, improve equitable access, and ensure that underserved communities and Tribal voices are represented. But we are concerned that the document fails to identify actions necessary to protect and conserve natural and cultural resources such as wildlife, wildlife habitat and migration corridors, cultural sites and sacred landscapes, soils, vegetation, riparian areas, dark skies, and natural soundscapes. Instead, the Blueprint makes clear that the BLM gives precedence to meeting demand and increasing access over science-based, proactive recreation management that also prioritizes resource protection.

Over 600 SUWA members and supporters submitted comments on the Blueprint. They urged the BLM to take a science-based approach to recreation management, noting that to truly transform its recreation program the agency must shift from its current *reactive* posture to one *proactively* anticipating needs and planning for them. That process must prioritize protection of wild, intact, remote, and/or low use locations while focusing recreation development and expansion in areas already impacted, and those near communities.

According to the agency, the next step in this process will be to develop state-level action plans and policies that will contain more substantive recreation planning and management requirements. SUWA is one of few conservation organizations working to develop proactive strategies for managing human-powered recreation on Utah’s public



### NEW GUIDANCE ON ELECTRIC BIKES A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

In August, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) finally issued guidance to clarify how the agency will manage use of electric bicycles (e-bikes) on non-motorized trails, and how to implement a Trump-era e-bike rule. That rule authorized the BLM, in some cases, to exempt e-bikes, including e-mountain bikes, from the definition of motorized vehicle, and to treat them as a non-motorized bicycles.

SUWA and our allies have been pushing the administration to reverse the e-bike rule, and return the BLM to travel management laws and policies established to protect natural and cultural resources, promote public safety, and minimize user conflicts. The new guidance falls short of that goal but is a step in the right direction.

The BLM may still okay e-bike use on trails where off-road vehicle use is otherwise prohibited. But the guidance identifies the challenges e-bike use poses, particularly to law enforcement. It also notes the lack of research on the resource impacts of e-bikes and their compatibility with other public land users. It calls for a cautious approach pending additional research that might inform BLM decisions about where and when e-bike use is, and is not, appropriate. It also requires BLM leadership oversight of proposals to open non-motorized trails to e-bike use.

Studies detail significant benefits of cycling and being outdoors. Electric bicycles offer alternatives for people unable to ride traditional bikes for a range of reasons. Importantly, the new guidance clarifies that persons with disabilities may request a reasonable authorization to ride an e-bike on non-motorized trails and simplifies the process for obtaining such approvals.

SUWA welcomes the guidance’s cautious approach, increased scrutiny, and focus on resource protection and public health and safety. It is important that this new user group is brought into the mix thoughtfully.

lands. We will continue to participate actively in this process to ensure that Utah's action plans and policies protect the wild lands and wildlife we love, while also providing for equitable, safe, and high-quality recreation experiences.

—*Judi Brawer*

## APPEALS COURT HEARS ARGUMENT ON SUWA'S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN RS 2477 LITIGATION

Passed in 1866 as part of the Mining Act, Revised Statute (RS) 2477 is an obscure law that granted “highway” rights-of-way over federal lands in certain circumstances. Congress repealed RS 2477 in 1976, but Utah's politicians seized on it in the 1990s and early 2000s in an attempt to prevent redrock wilderness designation and assert local control over federal public lands. We've been wrangling with the State of Utah ever since.

In November, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals heard argument in SUWA's appeal of a federal district judge's decision that denied SUWA's motion to intervene “as of right” in a RS 2477 lawsuit known as the Kane County “bellwether” trial. The bellwether trial involves 15 claimed rights-of-way in Kane County, many of which are also located within

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, wilderness study areas, and the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Currently, SUWA has “permissive” intervention status and our ability to participate in the litigation has been significantly curtailed. This appeal is intended to give us a meaningful seat at the table.

It's our position that the judge's denial of SUWA's ability to intervene as of right can't be squared with previous, binding federal court decisions from the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit (decisions issued in favor of SUWA in 2019 and 2020).

In the current appeal, the state is rehashing arguments they previously made—and lost—in the 2019 and 2020 litigation. For example, the state asserts that RS 2477 litigation does not harm SUWA and its members' interest in protecting wild places. Not only has this argument already been rejected (multiple times), but it is also clearly inaccurate.

Indeed, the state is currently arguing in a different lawsuit that the Labyrinth Canyon travel plan (the result of over a decade of SUWA's advocacy) illegally closes claimed RS 2477 rights-of-way in Grand County. If the state can prevent the BLM from closing routes in travel plans simply by claiming rights-of-way exist, that harms SUWA's ability to protect wild places. We are hopeful that the state's misleading arguments will, once again, fail.

—*Michelle White*

## SUWA'S FIELDWORK INFORMS AGENCY PLANNING EFFORTS

As late autumn settles in, SUWA's field team is completing another season of field assessments and inventories. Our fieldwork this year remained heavily focused on the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) travel management plans with the majority of this year's time spent in the San Rafael Swell and Henry Mountains regions.

The BLM is required to complete new travel management plans under a settlement agreement stemming from litigation SUWA and others brought against the agency's 2008 travel plans. Our goal is to secure final plans that fully consider—and seek to avoid—the impacts of motorized travel upon other resources and to minimize conflicts with non-motorized recreation.

We have also been concentrating some of this year's inventory work in Bears Ears National Monument as the agency prepares a new management plan for the area. Our documentation will inform the agency's planning effort and other management decisions, including motorized travel designations. The fieldwork will help us provide thorough, helpful comments on the draft plan when it is released.

Our excellent seasonal staff includes Cedar Fisher and Troy Anderson. Together, they've logged hundreds of rough, dusty miles in Utah's backcountry. The sheer volume of our inventory work keeps them busy throughout the field season.





LAUREN IS THE QUEEN OF REDROCK BILL COSPONSORS AND CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES.

## LAUREN HAINSWORTH HITS CAPITOL HILL

Lauren Hainsworth, SUWA's new legislative advocate, joined our Washington, DC staff in May. Lauren graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in environmental sustainability and anthropology. That has proven to be a useful background in her meetings with members of Congress and their staff.

Before joining our DC team, Lauren was an intern with SUWA's Utah-based grassroots organizing team and attended this year's Wilderness Week event on Capitol Hill as a Utah activist.

Lauren is an excellent addition to our team. She has secured literally dozens of House cosponsorships of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act already, logging thousands of steps around the Hill and sending email after email with important wilderness information to congressional staff. She is also a great person to work with—and not only because she bakes the most amazing brown butter chocolate chip cookies (they are truly delicious).

We are confident that Lauren will help SUWA achieve some of our biggest cosponsorship years yet, and we are delighted to have her on the team!

## GRANT STEVENS LEADS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

We're pleased to welcome Grant Stevens as SUWA's new communications director in Salt Lake City. An ideal fit for the role, he brings with him a deep love for public lands and many years of nonprofit marketing and communications experience.

Grant previously served as communications director for Wilderness Workshop in western Colorado. As a one-person communications department, he juggled everything from pitching media stories and writing newsletter articles to developing outreach plans and managing social media platforms. Prior to that, he spent seven years at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, where he led engagement and advocacy campaigns to save historic places ranging from the Houston Astrodome to the James River. His educational background includes a Master of Environmental Law and Policy degree from Vermont Law School.

At SUWA, Grant now leads a small but growing communications team that plays a leading role in our advocacy, fundraising, and public engagement efforts. When he joined us in June, he had little choice but to hit the ground running as we immediately handed him some time-sensi-



GRANT HAS HIT THE GROUND RUNNING IN SALT LAKE CITY BOTH LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY.

tive projects related to our 40th Anniversary Celebration in September. Thanks in part to his impressive organizational skills, he handled it all with aplomb. In the months since, he's collaborated with every team at the organization on both long-term campaign planning and rapid-response media and member outreach.

Grant grew up in the tiny farming community of Conrad, Iowa, which celebrates its status as the "black dirt capitol of the world" with an annual festival fittingly known as Black Dirt Days. His small-town "can do" attitude and warm, friendly demeanor have already endeared him to his SUWA colleagues and we are grateful to have someone with his energy, skills, and experience working in defense of the redrock.

## MICHELLE MARTINEAU MOVES ON

After a decade at SUWA, Administrative and Human Resources Director Michelle Martineau has moved on to new adventures. Michelle joined our staff as membership coordinator in the fall of 2013 and went on to lead our development and administrative team for nearly six years. Her career at SUWA, which began just as we celebrated our 30th anniversary in 2013, was neatly bookended by our



WE WISH MICHELLE ALL THE BEST IN HER NEW POSITION AT THE UTAH RIVERS COUNCIL.

40th anniversary celebration this past September (where, on her last official day of work, she gamely staffed our busy merchandise table).

Michelle wore several hats at SUWA over the years. After learning to navigate our membership database, keep our mailings on schedule, and plan events, she shifted roles and jumped straight into managing payroll, handling our financial accounts, and serving as our first official HR director (after studying for and passing the certification exam). With loyal lab Sierra always at her side, she did the largely invisible work that keeps our organization running smoothly day in and day out.

Though she's moved on from the world of redrock advocacy, Michelle still works in defense of Utah's desert ecosystems. You'll find her over at the Utah Rivers Council, where she serves as the organization's director of finance and operations. Joyelle Hatch, previously our administrative associate, has stepped into her role at SUWA.

Thank you, Michelle, for guiding us into our fourth decade of wilderness protection and leaving us well prepared for the decades ahead. We'll see you on Utah's desert trails and mountain slopes!

## TARA BENALLY AND BOBBY MCENANEY JOIN SUWA BOARD

SUWA is pleased to welcome Tara Benally and Bobby McEnaney to our board of directors.

**Tara Benally** grew up on the Navajo Nation in southern San Juan County, Utah and now lives in the town of Bluff. As a field organizer for the Rural Utah Project, a nonprofit working to "empower underrepresented voters in rural Utah," she recruits, trains, and supports new candidates running for local and state elections.

Outside of her "day job," she helps members of her community start their own organizations and improve their programs by raising funds and collaborating with other nonprofit and governmental entities. She has also initiated a Native Youth Foster Kids program that emphasizes Navajo traditional foraging practices, helping young people identify traditional food and medicine. Tara explains, "It is important for knowledge keepers like myself to pass down the knowledge our elders have given us to our foster kids,



TARA'S DEEP COMMITMENT TO BOTH LAND AND COMMUNITY ARE TRULY INSPIRING.

providing them with a sense of identity, strength, and pride in who they are.”

Through her involvement with organizations like SUWA, The Rural Utah Project, Grand Canyon Trust, and Advance Native Political Leadership, she has gained a deeper understanding of the importance of advocating for public lands and water rights. She believes that by working together and recognizing each other's humanity, diverse communities can become a powerful force for good. An excellent case in point is the successful campaign to establish Bears Ears National Monument.

Tara has a background in construction and works part-time as a cook, server, and caterer. Her life is enriched by the love she has for her children, family, friends, and community members. She is committed to advocating for them with the guidance of her faith and traditional teachings. We are grateful for the unique insights and experiences she brings to the SUWA board.

**Bobby McEnaney** is a longtime friend and colleague of ours. Hailing from Montana and Idaho, Bobby has worked for nearly two decades at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) on public lands issues such as fossil fuel development, the transition to renewable energy sources, grazing, and wilderness legislation. The latter includes the 2019 Emery County Public Land Management Act (passed as part of the larger John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act), which designated more than 660,000 acres of wilderness in Utah's San Rafael Swell region.



SUWA WELCOMES LONGTIME FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE BOBBY MCENANEY TO THE BOARD.

Prior to that, Bobby led a campaign to protect the Owyhee Canyonlands region of Idaho from an expanded Department of Defense presence (more overflights, more bombing ranges). He also worked extensively on a campaign dedicated to cleaning up the toxic mess generated by our nation's nuclear weapons complex during the Cold War era.

Though Bobby currently lives just outside of Washington, DC, his heart remains in the West and we're glad to give him another reason to visit.

## GRASSROOTS LEADERS CONVENE IN BOULDER, UTAH

In September, more than 30 redrock activists traveled to beautiful Boulder, Utah, for our semi-annual Grassroots Leader Retreat. We invite participants from Utah and across the country to this three-day event to build community, learn tools for effective activism, and draw inspiration from the vibrant desert landscape.

The grassroots leaders attended both large and small group sessions focused on such topics as SUWA's history, the role of desert protection in mitigating the climate crisis, and the wealth of opportunities for people to get involved in our movement regardless of where they live. The activists also spent time hiking together amid stunning redrock scenery.

*(Continued next page)*



ACTIVISTS AT SUWA'S GRASSROOTS LEADER RETREAT LEARN ABOUT THE BLM'S PLANNING PROCESS FOR GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT. © SUWA

A special focus of this retreat was the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument planning process (see page 11). Participants went on a guided field trip in the monument and shared pointers on how to prepare and submit personal comments on the draft plan.

Our activists find these retreats uplifting, and so does the SUWA staff. It inspires us to have such thoughtful, committed people working to protect wild Utah.

—Clayton Daughenbaugh

## STEWARDSHIP TEAM WRAPS 2023 SEASON

The air cools in the desert and snows begin to accumulate on southern Utah's isolated peaks as our stewardship program rounds out another year of protecting public lands.

This year we prioritized our national monuments, allocating one-quarter

of our projects to working in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, from south of Kanab to north of Escalante.

We also returned to the San Rafael Desert, where we transformed a successfully reclaimed wilderness study area (WSA) incursion into a hiking

trailhead at the new boundary of the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness.

By late October, with one more project yet to go, we had addressed over 38 miles of illegal routes, built 5,830 feet of protective fencing and barriers, installed 74 boundary and restoration signs, rehabilitated 76 sites of non-permitted camping, remediated 1,200 square feet of graffiti, and carried out 1,535 pounds of trash from public lands. Thank you to all who supported our work this year. You are why we succeed.

Our next season is just around the corner. Mark your calendars for February 1st when we will release the 2024 project schedule. In the meantime, learn more about our program at [suwa.org/stewardship](https://suwa.org/stewardship) or register at [suwa.org/apply](https://suwa.org/apply) to ensure you receive first notice of all upcoming volunteer opportunities.

We hope to see you in the field next year!

—Jeremy Lynch



PORTAL SIGNS, AS THEY ARE CALLED, MARK THE BOUNDARIES OF WILDERNESS AREAS AND OTHER PROTECTED LANDSCAPES. THEY ARE USED THROUGHOUT UTAH BY THE BLM. OUR STEWARDSHIP CREWS HAVE HELPED INSTALL SEVERAL OVER THE YEARS. © SUWA



© CHRIS ENGLAND

## MAKE A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT IN UTAH WILDERNESS

### JOIN OUR MONTHLY GIVING PROGRAM

If you'd like a convenient, hassle-free way to help SUWA, our monthly giving program is for you. Monthly giving of any amount is easy and secure; includes all the benefits of membership; and provides SUWA with reliable, year-round funding to fight current and future threats to the redrock.

Is protecting the redrock worth \$5 or \$10 a month to you? That's only \$60 or \$120 a year and goes a long way to helping keep your public lands wild. Already a sustaining member? For just \$5 or \$10 more a month, you can make an even greater impact and provide SUWA with a reliable funding source to keep fighting in defense of your public wild lands during these challenging times.

For more details on joining SUWA as a sustaining member, please visit our website at [suwa.org/monthly](https://suwa.org/monthly).

### LEAVE A LEGACY FOR THE REDROCK

Please consider leaving a gift to SUWA in your will or trust. Bequests are a simple, effective way for those of us who love the redrock to ensure that when we're gone, the work to protect these amazing landscapes continues.

A gift to SUWA from your estate—whatever the amount—is entirely free from federal estate taxes. This means we are able to use the full amount of the bequest to protect the redrock. Also, bequests generally are not subject to state inheritance or estate taxes. You can also create a bequest so that the needs of your heirs are taken care of first.

A bequest for SUWA (or any other charitable organization) is very simple to establish. Just name the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance in your will, trust, retirement plan, or life insurance policy, along with our contact information and tax ID number and the dollar amount or percent of your estate you wish to contribute.

If you'd like to make a gift to SUWA or have already included a gift to SUWA in your estate, please contact Heather Rose Martinez at (801) 428-3971 or visit [suwa.org/plannedgiving](https://suwa.org/plannedgiving).

## GIVE THE GIFT OF UTAH WILDERNESS THIS YEAR

This holiday season, we invite you to consider several meaningful gift options that support SUWA's work to protect the redrock.

### Gift Memberships

'Tis the season for SUWA gift memberships! Purchase a \$25 gift membership during the month of November or December and your gift recipient will receive a welcome packet that includes a subscription to our quarterly newsletter, the instantly recognizable "Protect Wild Utah" sticker, and a special letter naming you as the membership donor. Get your loved ones involved in the fight to protect Utah's redrock country! Give the gift of Utah wilderness by visiting our website at [suwa.org/giftmemberships](https://suwa.org/giftmemberships)

### SUWA Swag

Delight your friends and family with apparel and accessories that are not only stylish but also express a love for wilderness. New items this year include fanny packs and festive party shirts. Make sure your gifts arrive in time by ordering before December 1st for Hanukkah delivery and by December 8th for Christmas. Each purchase you make supports our mission to protect Utah's wild places. Visit our website at [suwa.org/goodies](https://suwa.org/goodies) or click 'SHOP' at the top of our home page to get started.



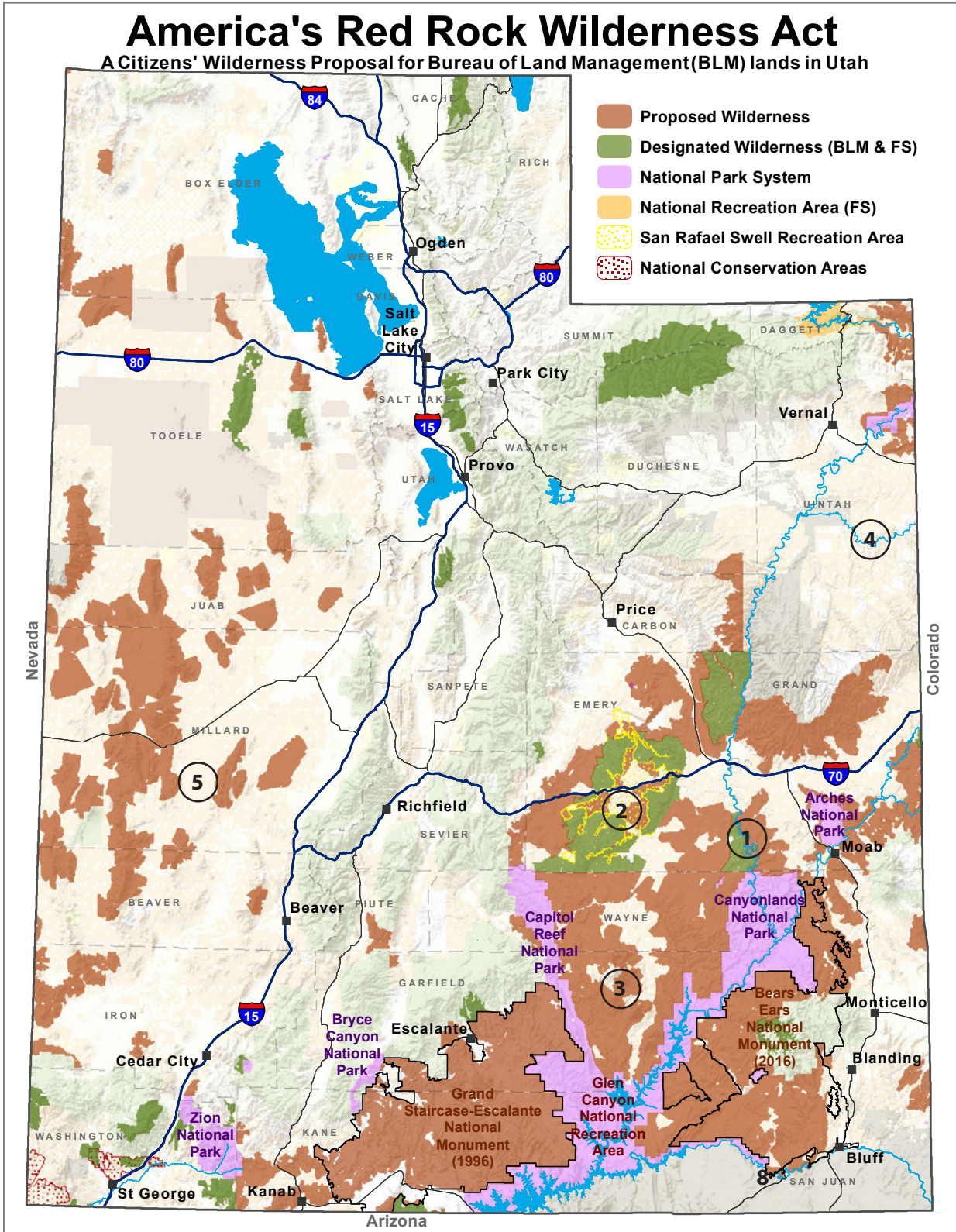
3-CAN FANNY PACKS BY WAVE, MADE LOCALLY IN SALT LAKE CITY.



LEFT: OUR SUPER SOFT AND LIGHT 40TH ANNIVERSARY LOGO TEE IN MIDNIGHT BLUE. RIGHT: STRETCH-TECH PARTY SHIRT IN CANYON ORANGE. BOTH IMAGES SHOW EMBROIDERED DESERT DEFENDER CAP.

# America's Red Rock Wilderness Act

A Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Utah



- ① Labyrinth Canyon (p. 6)
- ② San Rafael Swell (p. 8)
- ③ Henry Mountains (p. 8)
- ④ White River (p. 13)
- ⑤ Sevier Lake (p. 14)



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## CHEERS TO FOUR DECADES OF REDROCK ACTIVISM!

We offer our deepest gratitude to the members, activists, volunteers, and supporters who made our 40th Anniversary Celebration so memorable, and to each and every one of you who has helped defend the redrock through activism or financial support year after year. For those who couldn't join us at our September 9th event, here are a few highlights.



TOP LEFT: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SCOTT GROENE WITH BOARD VICE-CHAIR AND SECRETARY REBECCA CHAVEZ-HOUCK AND BOARD CHAIR TOM KENWORTHY. BOTTOM LEFT: EVENT ATTENDEES WATCHING A RECORDED ADDRESS BY SENATOR RICHARD DURBIN. RIGHT: SUWA STAFF AT THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF UTAH. © NATALIE SIMPSON/BEEHIVE PHOTO AND DIANE KELLY/SUWA