

AMERICA'S RED ROCK WILDERNESS ACT

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America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would add qualifying Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands in Utah to the National Wilderness Preservation System. At the beginning of the 116th Congress, this landscape gained significant protection with the passage of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (S. 47), but there's still a long way to go.

The updated version of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would designate 8.7 million acres of BLM wilderness, completing wilderness areas partially designated by S. 47 (Labyrinth and Desolation Canyons) while protecting remarkable landscapes like Cedar Mesa, the Dirty Devil, and lands illegally removed from Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears national monuments. This visionary legislation was developed by citizen activists who exhaustively researched, field checked, and documented their proposal in the interest of preserving what was left of Utah's wild canyon country. No-where 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, rollbacks of national monument protections, and management plans that degrade wilderness resources.

National and Local Support

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act is supported by the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and many other national and local conservation groups which together comprise the Utah Wilderness Coalition. The bill's sponsors, Rep. Alan Lowenthal in the House and Sen. Dick Durbin in the Senate, are tireless champions of redrock country. In the 115th Congress, the bill received the sponsorship of 123 representatives and 26 senators.

Support for public lands conservation and outdoor recreation among Utahns remains robust. A 2019 poll conducted by the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project reports the following statistics on Utah voters:

- 61% say they support protection over production on our public lands
- 71% identify as outdoor recreationalists
- 56% oppose eliminating protections for national monuments
- 66% are willing to increase taxes for conservation purposes
- 67% say public lands were a factor when they chose to live in the West



Citizen activists continue to call for the protection of America's Red Rock Wilderness at congressional town halls, at the Utah State Capitol, and in Washington, DC. © SUWA.



Biological Values



Desert bighorn sheep. © Rob Daugherty.

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. According to the Utah Professional Archaeological Council, which endorsed America's Red Rock Wilderness Act in 1995, "maintaining roadless areas is the largest and least costly deterrent to pothunting, inadvertent driving over sites, and vandalism." To protect ancestral lands and sacred sites, a historic coalition of five tribal nations led a campaign to proclaim the Bears Ears cultural landscape of southeast Utah a national monument. Designated by President Barack Obama in December 2016, the 1.35 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument encompasses over 983,000 acres of proposed wilderness in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. The Tribes continue to defend its original boundaries despite the Trump administration's efforts to repeal and replace it.



Utah's wilderness lands shelter numerous prehistoric artifacts and cultural sites. © Bruce Hucko.

Economic Values



Tourists in Moab. © Moab Area Travel Council.

Research confirms that the protection of public lands, including wilderness designation, helps to diversify and enhance local economies by preserving the unspoiled natural landscapes, outstanding recreational opportunities, clean air, and clean water that make rural communities attractive places to live and work. Businesses ranging from major outdoor equipment manufacturers and retailers, to bed and breakfast and restaurant owners, to outfitters and artists support America's Red Rock Wilderness Act because it protects Utah's natural scenic wonders while complementing the regional economy. According to the Colorado College 2019 State of the Rockies Project, 6 in 10 nationally say the outdoor recreation economy will be important to the future of the West; in Utah, 9 in 10 believe the same.

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 relatively small percentage of visitors who participate in motorized recreation. 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. © James Kay.

Threats to America's Red Rock Wilderness

Climate Change

Climate change is impacting 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 subsequent dust storms. Disturbed sediments 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, vegetation treatments, and grazing exacerbate these changes. The best strategy for protecting our public lands and making them as resilient as possible to these effects is to preserve 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 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). 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.
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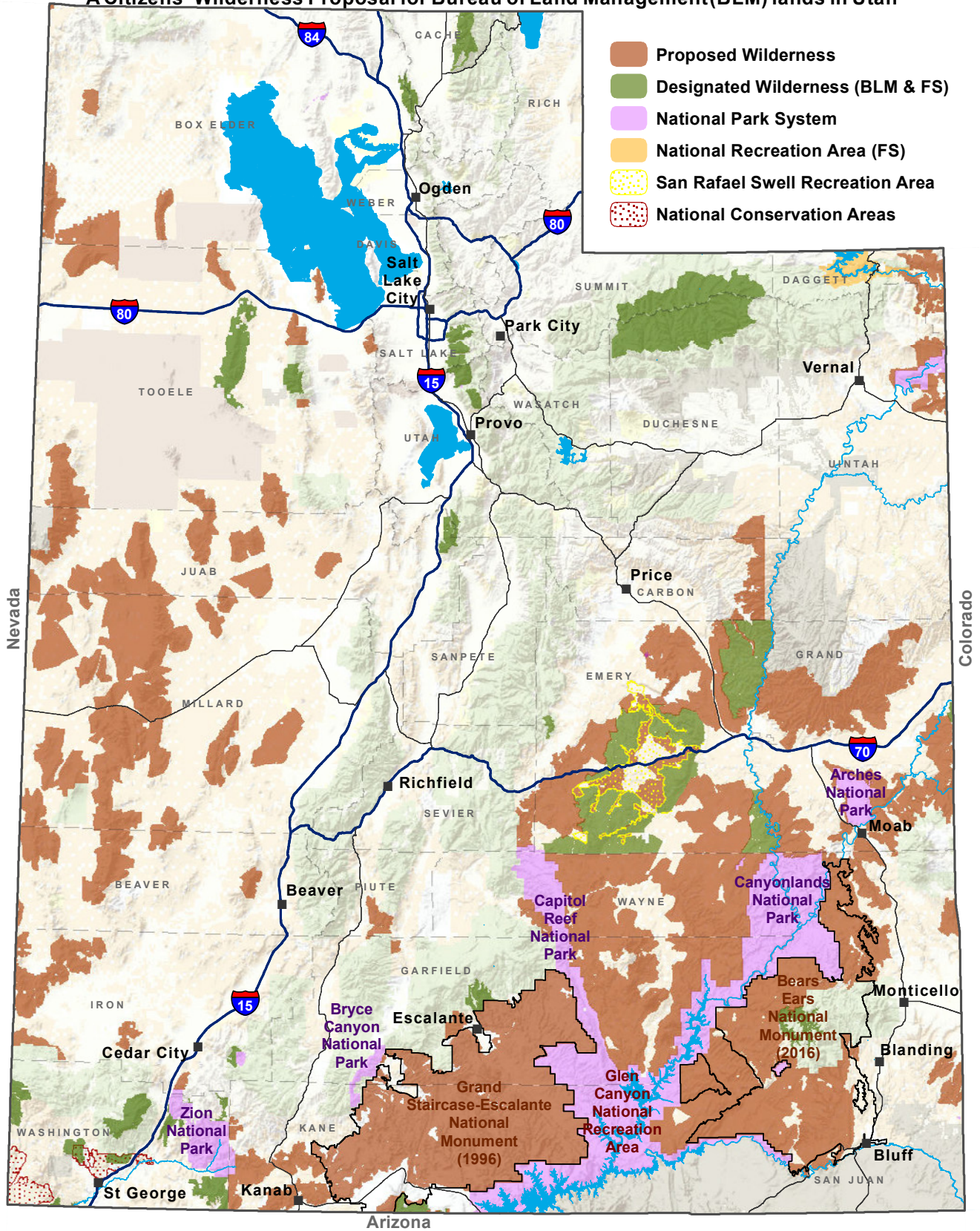
Oil and gas development mars the landscape just six miles from the boundary of Canyonlands National Park. © Liz Thomas/SUWA.

Fossil Fuel Leasing and Development

While the amount of “technically recoverable” oil and gas reserves on lands within America's Red Rock Wilderness Act is negligible—less than 4 weeks of natural gas and roughly a week of oil at current national consumption levels—the threat to these lands from fossil fuel 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 nearly 2 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. Nevertheless, the BLM continues to target some of the most culturally and ecologically significant landscapes in Utah for fossil fuel leasing and development.

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act

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



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