An Important Part of Protecting 30% of U.S. Lands by 2030

America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act would add 8.4 million acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands in Utah to the National Wilderness Preservation System. The bill would designate as wilderness the unprotected portions of Labyrinth and Desolation Canyons along with equally remarkable places like the Book Cliffs, the Dirty Devil, and lands in the Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears National Monuments (as originally designated). As a whole, this wild and expansive landscape comprises a key component of what scientists say is needed today: protecting 30 percent of America’s lands and oceans by the year 2030 to prevent the collapse of Earth’s natural systems. America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act alone would preserve 1.5 percent of the lands needed to reach this goal. Nowhere else in the lower 48 can such intact wilderness-quality desert lands be found; unfortunately, this national treasure is threatened by rampant off-road vehicle use, inappropriate energy development, vegetation removal projects, and other shortsighted management and policy decisions.

A Visionary Proposal with National and Local Support

America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act 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. The proposal 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 are Rep. Alan Lowenthal in the House and Sen. Dick Durbin in the Senate.

In Utah, support for public lands conservation and outdoor recreation remains robust. A 2021 poll conducted by the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project reports the following statistics on Utah voters:

- 76% support a national goal of protecting 30 percent of America’s lands and oceans by 2030.
- 73% support creating new national parks, national monuments, national wildlife refuges, and tribal protected areas.
- 71% support making public lands a net-zero source of carbon pollution.
- 68% think that oil and gas development on national public lands should be stopped or strictly limited.
- 64% would prefer their member of Congress emphasize conservation and recreation on public lands over maximizing the amount of land available for energy development.
New peer reviewed research shows that America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act makes a significant contribution to mitigating climate change. Protecting these wild landscapes would keep a significant amount of fossil fuels in the ground, accounting for 5.7 percent of the carbon mitigation needed to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Additionally, scientists estimate that the lands proposed for protection currently sequester and store 247 million metric tons of organic carbon in plants and soils. Designating these lands as wilderness would even help preserve flows in the Colorado River (the lifeblood of the arid Southwest) by preventing surface-disturbing activities that cause windborne dust to coat Colorado snowpack, melting it faster and earlier.

**Environmental Values: Mitigating climate change**

**Cultural Values: Preserving Lifeways and History**

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 cultural 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 original 1.35 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument encompasses over 983,000 acres of proposed wilderness in America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act.

**Biological Values: sheltering and connecting wildlife**

Utah’s diverse landscapes shelter at least two dozen endangered or sensitive species, including unique relict plant communities and a large number of bee species found nowhere else in the world. In addition, these lands play a vital role in connecting ecosystems in the Rocky Mountain West, conserving parts of five key wildlife corridors that serve as lifelines for deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, black bear, mountain lion, and potentially wolves. The diverse topography of the region also provides critical climate refugia: areas where plants and animals can weather abrupt environmental changes.

**Economic & Recreational Values: Benefitting Communities**

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. According to the Colorado College 2021 State of the Rockies Project poll, 77 percent of Western voters say that the presence of national public lands in their state helps the state economy. 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.
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 cultural artifacts are more likely to be vandalized or looted if an ORV route is located nearby. When travel management plans for Utah’s BLM lands were last updated in 2008, they blanketed the state with over 20,000 miles of ORV routes—including 3,000 miles of routes in proposed wilderness (much of it recognized as wilderness caliber by the BLM). Many of these are nothing more than faded mining tracks, wildlife trails, streambeds, and canyon bottoms. Replacing this reckless, unbalanced management approach with a careful, science-based planning process would preserve wilderness resources until Congress has a chance to permanently protect them.

Fossil Fuel Leasing and Development

The Trump administration’s four-year “energy dominance” agenda blanketed Utah with oil and gas leases, including on lands proposed for wilderness designation. Meanwhile, the oil and gas industry has stockpiled nearly 2 million acres of leased federal land in Utah that are not even under development. With this kind of surplus, new leasing is clearly unnecessary. Moreover, the lands proposed for wilderness designation in Utah, once federally protected, can mitigate the worst effects of climate change; according to the U.S. Geological Survey, about one quarter of all U.S. carbon emissions come from fossil fuels extracted from public lands. The fossil fuel resources beneath public lands in America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act must be kept in the ground if we hope to avoid the worst outcomes of a changing climate.
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