

AMERICA'S RED ROCK WILDERNESS ACT

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AN IMPORTANT PART OF PROTECTING 30% OF U.S. LANDS BY 2030

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (H.R. 3031 / S. 1310) would add more than 8 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. Melanie Stansbury in the House and Sen. Dick Durbin in the Senate.

In Utah, support for public lands conservation and outdoor recreation remains robust. A 2023 poll conducted by the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project reports the following statistics on Utah voters:

- **78%** support creating new national parks, national monuments, national wildlife refuges, and tribal protected areas.
- **75%** support a national goal of conserving 30% of America's lands and waters by the year 2030.
- **73%** support presidents continuing to use their ability to protect existing public lands as national monuments.
- **64%** prefer that leaders place more emphasis on protecting water, air, wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities over maximizing the amount of land available for drilling and mining.
- **63%** consider themselves to be conservationists.



Citizen activists continue to call for the protection of America's Red Rock Wilderness in Washington, DC and through letters, emails, phone calls, and online meetings with legislators. © SUWA





Carbon-sequestering cryptobiotic soil. © Whit Richardson

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES: MITIGATING CLIMATE CHANGE

New peer reviewed research shows that America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act makes a significant contribution to mitigating climate change.

Scientists estimate that the lands proposed for protection currently sequester and store 247 million metric tons of organic carbon in plants and soils—a number that would likely grow by 10 percent if the lands remain undisturbed into the coming decades. Additionally, protecting these wild landscapes would keep fossil fuels in the ground, accounting for a meaningful amount of the carbon mitigation needed to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Wilderness designation would even help preserve flows in the Colorado River by preventing surface-disturbing activities that cause windborne dust to coat Colorado snowpack, melting it faster and earlier.

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.



Cultural site in Bears Ears National Monument. © Bruce Hucko



Desert bighorn sheep in Utah (stock photo)

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. In a recent (2022) Colorado College State of the Rockies Project poll, 74 percent of Western voters said 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.



Utah’s wild BLM lands provide outstanding opportunities for recreational activities such as kayaking, hiking, horseback riding, and fishing. © 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 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.



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



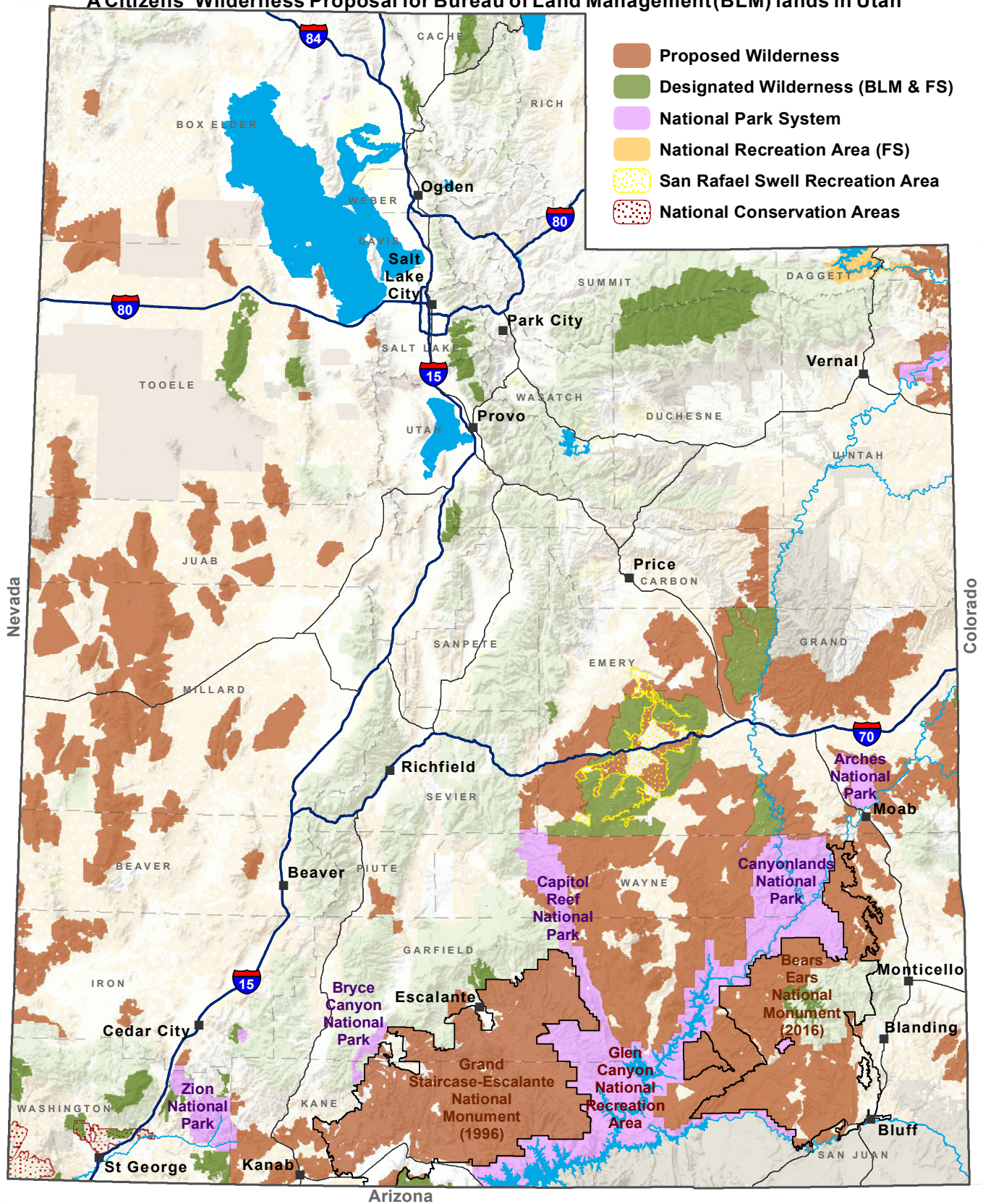
Oil and gas development mars the landscape just six miles from the boundary of Canyonlands National Park. © Liz Thomas/SUWA

FOSSIL FUEL LEASING AND DEVELOPMENT

The Trump administration's four-year "energy dominance" agenda aimed to blanket Utah with oil and gas leases, but it only partially succeeded due to lawsuits brought by conservationists. Meanwhile, the oil and gas industry has stockpiled nearly 1.5 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.

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act

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



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