

DON'T WRECK THE SWELL—FACT SHEET



Mussentuchit Badlands – photo by Ray Bloxham

On May 9th, Sen. Orrin Hatch and Rep. John Curtis introduced the Emery County Public Land Management Act of 2018 (S. 2809 in the Senate and H.R. 5727 in the House), which targets the world-renowned San Rafael Swell. Now, with no real opportunity for public input, they are pressing hard to pass the bill by the end of the year.

For many Americans, especially Utahns, the Swell is the “go to” wilderness landscape for camping, hiking, biking, rafting, and restoration. The bill could determine the fate of over a million and a half acres of wild public lands in the San Rafael Swell and nearby Labyrinth and Desolation Canyons.

Conservationists have long advocated designating more than 1.5 million acres of BLM and Forest Service wilderness in this vast county. The Hatch/Curtis bill fails to do justice to these spectacular landscapes. It also cuts up protected areas with off-road vehicle routes, effectively ensuring that they will remain open in perpetuity. The bill is a step backward for conservation.

Conservationists have sought to find middle ground with Sen. Hatch and Rep. Curtis, urging reasonable improvements that would add several critical wilderness areas neglected by the bill. If these areas were added as wilderness, the Emery County bill would result in a total of 51% of the Emery County portion of America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act being protected as designated wilderness. To date, these suggestions have been largely ignored.

Here are some of the major problems with the bill:

Fails to adequately protect wilderness-quality lands

The bill does not protect enough land as wilderness. It designates less than half of the 1.5 million acres of wilderness-quality lands in Emery County, leaving more than 700,000 acres of BLM land without protection as wilderness. And most of the land proposed for wilderness protection in the bill is already managed as such—as Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) or Natural Areas.

Neglects extraordinary landscapes that deserve protection

Specific landscapes unacceptably neglected by the bill include:

- The San Rafael Badlands – This area comprises the western reach of the San Rafael Swell. It includes an extraordinary abundance of ancient rock art panels, habitation sites, stone working sites, burials, and more. The bill leaves the area vulnerable to oil and gas development and off-road vehicle abuse.
- Muddy Creek – Constituting the southern portion of the San Rafael Swell and reaching to the northeast corner of Capitol Reef National Park, this remote landscape provides extraordinary kayaking, canyoneering, backpacking, day hiking and car camping opportunities. The bill fails to protect the western portion of this intact, wild landscape as wilderness.
- Labyrinth Canyon –Labyrinth Canyon offers spectacular opportunities to families, beginners and experts alike who are seeking a wide range of quiet recreation, from technical canyoneering to canoeing, to daylong hikes in search of swimming holes. The bill utilizes an arbitrary county boundary in order to omit wilderness designation for the eastern side of the canyon in its entirety.

Hands over public lands to the State of Utah

Hands control and development of public lands owned by all Americans in the San Rafael Reef – including popular locations such as Crack and Chute Canyons – to the State of Utah for the expansion of Goblin Valley State Park, authorizing entrance fees and encouraging more over-crowding.

The bill also authorizes a land exchange that will give the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) ownership of nearly 12,000 acres of public lands that are proposed for wilderness designation in America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act. Nearly 11,000 of these acres have also been identified by the BLM as qualifying as wilderness. Over time, these traded lands will be sold, leased, and/or developed.

Rolls back existing protections and exacerbates climate change

Rolls back existing protection for over 17,000 acres of WSAs, including removing a portion of the Turtle Canyon WSA to facilitate coal mining.

Leaves designated wilderness at risk

Allows the State of Utah to continue its federal court litigation seeking highway rights-of-way through designated wilderness, instead of resolving Revised Statute (R.S.) 2477 issues.

Excludes citizen input

From the get go, the Utah delegation allowed local county commissioners to control the process and the proposal, without any real regard for Utahns outside of Emery County, Native American tribes with cultural ties to the area, or the millions of Americans who have an interest in these lands.