

## **Testimony of Robert Redford**

### **House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands October 1, 2009 on H.R. 1925, America's Red Rock Wilderness Act**

#### **Introduction**

I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. And I want to especially thank Representative Grijalva, Chairman of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, for his keen interest and long-time support of Utah wilderness and for arranging a hearing on this bill. I also want to thank Chairman Rahall and members of the Natural Resources Committee for convening a hearing on this important piece of legislation. Finally, I would like to additionally thank Congressman Maurice Hinchey for his support and efforts in introducing this bill in the past nine Congresses, championing the bill initiated by his friend and mine, the late Congressman Wayne Owens of my home state of Utah.

The time has come to take action on America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. This critical piece of legislation has been proposed for nearly 20 years – and as time has passed, we have become even more aware of the importance of wilderness in our personal lives and the importance of wilderness for the health of our environment and our nation. The unchecked development of our nation's public lands for the financial benefit of a few must come to an end. More and more citizens across the country are learning of the impacts and real costs of energy development, mining, and road building in ecologically sensitive areas, and areas that retain outstanding wilderness values, and are demanding that the nation's public lands be managed for the benefit and well-being of the citizens of this country, rather than for special interests and industry looking to make financial gains on our nation's natural resources.

This week there has been a lot of media attention surrounding the new Ken Burns documentary series on the national parks. Although national parks are one of America's best ideas, I submit that wilderness protection – in national parks, national forest and public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management – is really America's best idea. In particular, Utah's wild lands have been in the making for eons, and virtually nothing man can do could improve upon what nature has made. Places with intriguing and descriptive names, such as Labyrinth and Desolation canyons along the Green River, the San Rafael Swell, Cedar Mesa, Nokai Dome, Valley of the Gods, the Book Cliffs, the Dirty Devil, Death Hollow, Vermilion Cliffs, and Mussentuchit Badlands are perfect and wonderful just as nature made them. These places and the other areas in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act are deserving of wilderness designation now, before their wilderness values are destroyed by senseless development. These are the lands that we must preserve and pass on to our grandchildren as nature made them. We must use our better judgment and acknowledge that wilderness is a finite resource, and that it is at

increasing risk of being lost to various developments. We must take immediate actions to protect what is left.

Utah is fortunate to have some of the most awe-inspiring, raw and rugged public lands in the world. Utah has approximately 23 million acres of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. However, over the course of the past 50-75 years, more than half of the 23 million acres has been developed -- mined, drilled, bulldozed, or developed to some extent -- so that the lands have lost their primal wild character. America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would protect what is left, including lands that rival those in Utah's flagship national parks of Zion, Bryce, Canyonlands and Arches. This is our chance to take a step forward and contribute to the wilderness inheritance of future generations, before more is lost. ***They will thank us for it.***

I have spent decades becoming familiar with Utah's wild lands -- exploring them and being nurtured by them. And I am still awed by their beauty. I have wondered through serpentine canyons and marveled at the shades of red that can color one rock wall. I have peered into alcoves filled with stone houses built by the ancient ancestors of today's Pueblo people. I have hiked with my family under sculpted arches, through pink sand dunes, and across mesas that open up to a sea of redrock vistas like no where else on Earth. I have heard distant coyotes call and the cascading song of the solitary canyon wren.

Preserving untrammelled lands, and exploring wild lands is deeply embedded not only in me, but is an American tradition -- it is part of our very beings. I was reminded of this and the popular support for Utah wilderness last fall, as Americans across the country demonstrated their commitment to Utah wilderness and made their voices heard by filing protests comments when the Bush Administration made oil and gas leases available to industry -- leases that were located in some of the most beloved redrock country in southern Utah. It is clear that Americans care about Utah's wild lands. And just as a short sighted national policy on energy has placed America's Red Rock wilderness on a bull's-eye, there is an equivalent need for national leadership to embrace a vision that preserves iconic places like America's Red Rock wilderness.

These lands are owned by the public, but unfortunately, without wilderness designation, these lands remain available to private speculative extractive and industrial development. Opponents to this bill make claims that wilderness would be the death of Utah's economy, while implying that Utah's economy is based largely on extractive industry jobs. These claims, however, are not borne out by the facts, and this argument is typical of the opposition who want fear, rather than opportunity, to rule the day. Based on the most current information provided by the U. S. Department of Energy, the state of Utah holds a mere 1% of the nation's verified oil reserves and approximately 2.5% of the nation's natural gas reserves. When we look at the subset of oil and gas deposits on lands included in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, the numbers are even more insignificant: 4 days of oil and less than 4 weeks of natural gas, at current consumption levels, are "technically recoverable," which does take into account the economic feasibility of recovering these trivial amounts. Therefore, even if Utah's economy was

solely based on oil and gas development, which it is not, passing the Red Rocks bill will have a practically negligible impact on oil and gas development and oil and gas related jobs.

Similarly, passing America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would not "lock up" the lands as some vocal opponents claim. While wilderness designation would protect these lands from future oil and gas development, off-road vehicle scars, and other types of development, wilderness designation would insure that hunters, anglers, boaters, birders, hikers, and families could continue to enjoy them. It is simply not credible to claim that America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would deny access to these lands.

I mentioned earlier that the time has come to pass this forward-looking legislation. There can be no doubt that we are at a critical juncture. We are learning more and more about the effects of climate change, air pollution, fouled rivers and streams that provide drinking water for humans as well as wildlife, and soil erosion that is carrying away nutrients from our desert soils and depositing layers of red dust on high mountain snowpack causing earlier and faster spring melt with its cascading effects to the ski industry, farmers and ranchers, and down stream water users. ***Scientists agree that protecting large roadless areas is critical for combating the effects of climate change.*** America's Red Rock Wilderness Act does this – it protects large roadless areas from surface disturbances caused by oil and gas development, other mineral leasing and development, and the growing impacts of off-road vehicles that cause soil erosion and the related loss of nutrients, and fugitive dust that has been associated with earlier and faster snowmelt on Colorado's mountains.

Finally, I want the committee and other congressional members to know that there is very strong local support in Utah for America's Red Rock Wilderness Act – contrary to what members of the Utah delegation allege. This is not anecdotal support, but support that was demonstrated recently by a statewide survey of Utahns. Sixty percent of the decided respondents to the Dan Jones and Associates' poll said that Utah's public lands – 9 million acres or more – should be protected as wilderness. Utahns recognize the benefits – quality of life and economic – of choosing wilderness over industrialization. Historically, there has been local opposition to various preservation efforts in Utah, including opposition to Arches National Park, Capitol Reef National Park, and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Of course, these places are much loved by Utahns today.

The truth is that no generation looks back and chastises the previous one for leaving a wilderness inheritance. America's Red Rock Wilderness Act is our chance to add to the nation's and future generations' natural heritage. Now is the time to be bold. Now is the time to act on behalf of future generations by protecting these lands, some of the last great places on earth.

As Wallace Stegner pointed out in his 1969 Wilderness Letter, "...something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed..... We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to

its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.”