December 6th, 2018

An open letter to Governor Gary Herbert
and Utah’s Congressional delegation

On behalf of our futures as parents, educators, scientists, doctors, politicians, lawyers, land stewards, and providers for the world, we write to protect the redrock wilderness in Emery County and throughout Southern Utah. The Emery County Public Lands Management Act as it stands does not do justice to the San Rafael Swell or Labyrinth Canyon. It sets a bad precedent for how we can collectively steward the wild lands of Southern Utah. Some of us were born here in Utah while others came for work, school, or recreation. All of us stayed for the unparalleled access to wild places and the healing they provide. We urge you to protect these wild places in Emery County and beyond for the benefit of all current and future generations of those who may seek solace in these lands.

As is, the Emery County Public Lands Management Act does not protect over two thirds of the 1.4 million acres of wilderness-qualifying lands in the region. It ignores land that is vulnerable to damage from extraction or motorized vehicle use. This, coupled with the downgrade of a National Conservation Area to a National Recreation Area, effectively prioritizes motorized recreation over ecosystem conservation. This lack of vision will cause irreparable wildlife damage in the area, affecting everything from the delicate cryptobiotic soil to the golden eagle. Further, the bill only protects lands within Emery County, leaving the ecological system surrounding the Green River protected on one side of the river, but susceptible to harm on the other. This is scientifically inadequate and morally unacceptable.

Many of our studies involve climate change mitigation. We are coming of age in a time where we are affected daily by anthropogenic climate change. We recognize that low income communities and communities of color all over the globe experience these impacts first--and have been for a long time. Children growing up in the Salt Lake Valley know the year-round air pollution as normal. It is irresponsible to support the continued extraction of fossil fuels on U.S. public land with the futures of Utah’s most vulnerable communities, our own health and careers, and future generations at stake. The natural landscapes of Utah’s public lands have deeper and longer lasting value than any amount of money natural gas, uranium, coal, and oil can create. By encouraging a new coal mine and operation in the Book Cliffs, the bill is ignorant to current climate reality and would most likely exacerbate the problem. People all over the country come to wild lands in Utah to escape the effects of development and climate change. Us humans cannot manufacture a new landscape, but we can slow or stop the backslide.

The iron-rich redrock of Utah runs in its citizens’ blood. Indigenous Tribes of the Southwest have been using the area for thousands of years. Hispanic and Latinx community members can trace Indigenous and Spanish roots to the Colorado Plateau as well. These landscapes are an immovable piece of many Utahns’ identities as well as public land enthusiasts all over the
planet. We encourage you to protect this land that many people consider “home” to the highest degree you can because it has a profound place in our sense of self.

Wilderness has irreplaceable and unquantifiable value to human life. For womxn, wilderness provides a spiritual and cultural service. Wilderness is a place to heal. Wilderness is important to us as young womxn because it provides a safe place for our wellbeing. Many of us feel safer in the wilderness than in the city because it is a place free from the everyday social transgressions that womxn, especially queer womxn and womxn of color, face. In solitude, we can discern the boundary at which our bodies end and society begins. We go to escape sexual harassment. We go to feel empowered in our bodies. It lets us focus on what we are capable of rather than what traps us. The openness of Utah’s redrock wilderness provides the peace and quiet we often lack in our minds and our surroundings. The stars are not obscured by a glass ceiling. Looking into seas of sandstone and sagebrush makes us feel small and our problems less significant. In this ever-growing and ever-changing world, it is of utmost importance to us to protect as much of these wild lands as we possibly can, for all present and future generations.

We the undersigned young womxn and allies demand that you oppose any action that undermines our remaining wild places. Stand on the right side of history and exercise the responsibility to your constituents and the American public by preserving Utah’s wild public lands as wilderness. This generation and all future generations deserve to experience them as they exist now. This bill does not do justice to Utah’s citizens nor its history. We will only support actions taken to protect more of Utah’s redrock wilderness.

Sincerely,

Josee Stetich - Westminster College Environmental Science Major, Honors College
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Leah Joyner - University of Utah PhD Student in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, Sustainability Committee Co-Chair
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C.C. Senator Orrin Hatch
Senator Mike Lee
Representative Rob Bishop
Representative Mia Love
Representative John Curtis
Representative Chris Stewart