

**Statement of
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Department of the Interior
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
H.R. 1925, America's Red Rock Wilderness Act
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Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on H.R. 1925, America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. The Department strongly supports the constructive resolution of public lands and wilderness designation issues in Utah and across the western United States. The passage by Congress and signing by the President of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act (Public Law 111-11) earlier this year constituted a very positive sign that we are moving these issues forward. While BLM has not had an opportunity to review many of the proposed designations, we would welcome the opportunity to work cooperatively with the sponsors of the legislation, the Committee and the members of the Utah delegation to resolve wilderness issues in Utah. We suggest an approach that is more geographically focused. The Washington County Act's wilderness provisions in Public Law 111-11 may provide a good example.

America's wilderness system includes many of the Nation's most treasured landscapes, and ensures that these untrammelled lands and resources will be passed down from one generation of Americans to the next. Through our wilderness decisions, we demonstrate a sense of stewardship and conservation that is uniquely American and is sensibly balanced with the other decisions we make that affect public lands.

Background

Substantial work on this proposal has been undertaken in Utah by citizen volunteers who care deeply about the land and its protection. The history of wilderness proposals in Utah is a contentious one. Resolution and certainty will serve all parties — including the conservation community, extractive industries, OHV enthusiasts, local communities, State government, and Federal land managers. An important milestone in this effort was reached with the inclusion of the wilderness designations within the Washington County Act as part of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, which was enacted earlier this year. We hope that this collaborative model can be extended to the rest of Utah.

H.R. 1925

H.R. 1925 proposes to designate 218 units of BLM-managed lands, comprising 9.4 million acres, into the National Wilderness Preservation System. These designations span the State of Utah, from the Great Basin region of western Utah, to the Canyonlands in the southeast; from the Uinta Basin and Book Cliffs in the northeastern corner of the State, to the Mojave Desert in southwestern Utah. Many of these lands are extraordinary, with unmatched wild land resources. The legislation breaks these designations into ten distinct areas:

Great Basin wilderness areas (44 areas)
Zion and Mojave Desert wilderness areas (14 areas)
Grand Staircase-Escalante wilderness areas (52 areas)
Moab-La Sal Canyons wilderness areas (15 areas)
Henry Mountains wilderness areas (11 areas)
Glen Canyon wilderness areas (9 areas)
San Juan-Anasazi wilderness areas (12 areas)
Canyonlands Basin wilderness areas (14 areas)
San Rafael Swell wilderness areas (21 areas)
Book Cliffs and Uinta Basin wilderness areas (26 areas)

The BLM reviewed some of the areas proposed for designation under H.R. 1925 through its recently-completed resource management plans. However, given the scope of the bill, the BLM has not undertaken a detailed analysis of each proposed designation in the context of designated wilderness. Should the Committee wish to move forward with the legislation, the BLM would carefully review each of the 218 areas to assess wilderness quality, boundary manageability, and conflicts with current uses, including motorized recreation and energy resource development. In addition, detailed mapping is necessary. Undertaking such a review and creating maps of these areas is both critically important to moving forward and a monumental task.

Below are a few examples of areas that an initial review, based on available information, indicates may deserve protection.

Desolation Canyon in eastern Utah, proposed for designation under section 110(b)(6) of H.R. 1925, is an extraordinary treasure, and is deeper in places than Arizona's Grand Canyon. This adventure destination draws visitors to study, explore, float, and hike through spectacular landscapes. Red rock canyons, white sand beaches, and cottonwood groves define this exceptionally picturesque area that supports a vibrant river outfitting community. The remoteness and simplicity of the area enhance its appeal.

Section 109 designates a number of wilderness areas throughout the San Rafael Swell. The unique character of the San Rafael Swell area began to form 50 million years ago when a massive uplift formed a geologic structure called an anticline. This bulge in the earth's crust was later eroded to leave high mesas, deep canyons, domes, and spectacular arches and spires. The terrain varies from sheer cliffs and dazzling canyons to more gently eroded badlands broken by shallow washes. San Rafael Reef extends through the southeast side of the area with dramatic sheer-walled cliffs, pinnacles, knobs, twisted canyons and valleys of stunning colors. It is a geological classroom of amazing proportions.

On the western edge of Utah, the Deep Creek Mountains, addressed in section 101(b)(10) of the proposed legislation, are a mountain oasis isolated within the Great Salt Lake Desert. Rising dramatically from the desert, granite canyons lead upward to snow-capped peaks. The vertical extremes have created rare ecological niches with exceptional biological diversity. In addition, numerous archaeological sites from a wide span of history are prevalent in the area.

Southeastern Utah's Grand Gulch, addressed in section 107(b)(6) of the proposed legislation, is another remarkable area. One of Utah's most popular wild land hiking areas, the Grand Gulch is home to rock art, ancient cliff dwellings, and other ceremonial structures that are located throughout the cliff-face area. More than 1,000 years ago the ancestors of modern Puebloan people inhabited much of the Grand Gulch, and today the preserved cultural resources are protected in this remote, primitive setting.

We also know that some of the areas proposed for designation present serious challenges because of existing and conflicting uses. For example, recreational use has exploded on public lands throughout the West, including in southern and eastern Utah. While many recreational activities, such as hunting and hiking, are compatible with BLM wilderness designation, others, such as mountain biking and OHV use, are not.

One use that conflicts with wilderness is mountain biking; an increasingly popular outdoor activity on BLM lands. In the Moab area, for example, both BLM's Bar M Mountain Bike Focus Area and parts of the Klondike Bluffs Mountain Bike Focus Area are within the Arches Adjacent area proposed in section 104(b)(1) of the legislation. Both of these areas, specifically designated by the BLM for mountain biking, receive substantial use -as many as 20,000 bikers annually on a single bike trail - which would be inconsistent with wilderness designation.

OHV use, either in designated motorized use areas or on designated road networks, also presents serious conflicts in a number of wilderness areas proposed in H.R.1925, including Goldbar Canyon (section 104 (b)(8)) and Duma Point (section 108 (b)(5)). About 70 percent of the proposed Goldbar area is within BLM's Gemini Bridges/Poison Spider Mesa Backcountry Motorized Touring Focus Area; as many as 800 vehicles per day access this area. Similarly, we estimate that over 21,000 OHVs use the Duma area annually.

Some existing or proposed energy development activities may pose inherent conflicts with some of the designations in the bill. In the Uinta Basin in eastern Utah, oil and gas development has increased dramatically over recent years. Some of the proposed wilderness areas include existing leases, some of which are currently producing, and others that we expect will produce in the future. Areas with these conflicts include Winter Ridge (section 110(b)(25)), Lower Bitter Creek (section 110(b)(13)), and Cane Spring Desert (section 106(b)(1)). In some cases the production areas could be carved out of the boundary of the proposed wilderness, but in others it may make designation impractical.

In addition, the recently-designated Westwide Energy Corridors may overlap portions of a number of the areas proposed for designation. In the case of the Upper Kanab Creek (section 103(a)(2)(N)), a 3½ mile segment of the corridor bisects the wilderness area proposed in the bill.

Utah's west desert has potential for solar, wind, and geothermal development that the BLM would like to further review as well, and we hope that the Committee will consider this potential. For example, locations within the Antelope Range (section 101(b)(1)) and San Francisco Mountains (section 101(b)(34)) are currently under consideration for wind energy development. High-potential geothermal sites intersect the Crater Bench (section 101(b)(7)), Cricket Mountain

(section 101(b)(9)), Drum Mountains (section 101(b)(11)), Sand Ridge (section 101(b)(35)) and Granite Peak (section 101(b)(15)) areas.

Finally, section 102(b) of the bill provides for wilderness designations in the Zion and Mojave Deserts of southwestern Utah. We note that Title II, subtitle O of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act, Public Law 111-11, designated nearly 130,000 acres of BLM wilderness in this same area and many of the proposed designations in this subsection appear to overlap with the provisions of that law.

Conclusion

The beauty and power of Utah's red rock canyons, mountains, deserts and plateaus defy easy description. These extraordinary natural features include an expansive range of ecosystems. We support moving the discussion on designating wilderness in Utah forward. Our hope is that this hearing will be the impetus for the hard work that needs to be undertaken in order to make thoughtful decisions about these important lands. The Department of the Interior looks forward to working cooperatively with local and national constituencies, this subcommittee, the sponsor of the bill, and the Utah Congressional delegation toward that end.