

STATEMENT BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE  
ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS  
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON  
GATEWAYS TO PROSPERITY:  
MANAGING FEDERAL LANDS TO CREATE RURAL JOBS  
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Sub-committee, my name is Wes Curtis. I am the Vice President for Government Relations and Regional Services at Southern Utah University, and formerly a point person for two Utah Governors on rural affairs and public lands issues. I appreciate this opportunity to talk to you about Southern Utah University's outdoor initiatives and partnerships as they relate to the public lands, career training, and the land management agencies in southern Utah.

Having been actively involved with Utah public lands issues for over two decades, I have learned that the public lands are viewed by many in Utah as both a blessing and a curse. The controversies and contentions surrounding the management of these lands are almost as expansive as the lands themselves. I have also come to recognize that regardless of how one feels about the federal lands and their management, their existence, and the agencies that manage them, are a reality that we live with, and within that reality, in addition to the challenges, there are also many opportunities to be cultivated and developed. At SUU we are trying to make the most of these opportunities.

Within the sphere of the Southern Utah University service area, we count three national parks (Zion, Bryce Canyon, and Capitol Reef), five national monuments (Cedar Breaks, Pipe Springs, Grand Staircase-Escalante, Grand-Canyon Parshonts, Vermillion Cliffs), a National Recreation Area (Glen Canyon), numerous state parks, as well as millions of acres of BLM and Forest Service lands. Eighty to ninety percent of the lands that surround us are public lands, and these lands influence our lifestyles, culture, and economy in many ways – in positive ways and negative ways, in subtle ways and overt ways.

Southern Utah University's location in the midst of these world-class landscapes and natural resources is one of the primary things that sets SUU apart from other institutions of higher learning, and we feel compelled to make the most of this unique setting, both for the enhancement of the student experience and for the benefit of the regional community and economy.

At Southern Utah University, we are actively engaged in what we call our Outdoor Initiatives. These initiatives are directed at providing outdoor education, career training, and recreation opportunities for our students; working together in mutually beneficial partnerships with federal and state agencies; providing assistance to local government in addressing public lands issues and opportunities; and developing career path opportunities for students within federal and state agencies and within the tourism and recreation industries.

Within our region we are recognized and serve as a resource to the land management agencies, providing them with research projects, artistic and scientific resources, a liaison to local communities, and a provider of numerous student interns to meet their staffing needs. We are also about to launch a Demonstration Forest Project on SUU's 2,200 acre mountain ranch property, to serve as a living laboratory and model for best practices in such things as forest health, fuels reduction, and range management. We are currently working to bring all of these various initiatives together under the umbrella of a Southern Utah University Outdoor Center, and have an appropriation request through Congressman Jim Matheson and Senator Robert Bennett to help launch this Center.

With that overview, I would like to highlight some of our numerous outdoor initiative projects and partnerships. Hopefully, you will see that the scope of SUU's outdoor programs and initiatives is very much more than just job training. It is a reflection of the impact that the public lands have on our lives in this region of the West:

First and foremost, Southern Utah University is a student-focused institution of higher education. With an enrollment of 7,500 students, we have a distinct niche within the Utah System of Higher Education. SUU is dedicated to giving students a private school type experience – with personalized instruction, small classes, highly qualified faculty, and experience based learning – within the public institution structure of Utah's higher education system.

Constantly cognizant of the grandeur of its setting, SUU has developed numerous academic and regional service programs that connect the university community to the surrounding lands and the economic, cultural, artistic and scientific opportunities they provide.

### **Bachelors Degrees**

SUU offers two bachelor's degrees that have very direct connections to the tourism and outdoor recreation sectors of the state's economy. These are 1) a Bachelor Degree in Hotel, Resort, and Hospitality Management, and 2) a Bachelor's Degree in Outdoor Recreation in Parks and Tourism.

The Hotel, Resort and Hospitality Management degree gives students the skills and training for successful careers in hospitality management in such areas as lodging, retail, restaurants and recreational activities. These students take jobs with hotels, resorts, food service operations, convention centers and even transportation.

These students have also been involved in developing customer service strategies for large destination resorts, such as Ruby's Inn at Bryce Canyon National Park, and conducting extensive visitor profile research for the Utah Office of Travel and Tourism.

The Outdoor Recreation degree has three distinct areas of emphasis which allow students to specialize their educational focus, depending on whether they want to pursue career opportunities in public lands management, outdoor education, or tourism. In only its fourth year of existence, this program has already placed students in full-time jobs within the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, with private sector companies, and with state parks in two states.

### **Internships – The Intergovernmental Internship Cooperative**

Almost every one of the job placements through the Outdoor Recreation degree program as been the direct result of the student participating in an internship with the hiring agency. Southern Utah University has emerged as a national leader and model in the placement of student interns with federal and state land management agencies. This is done through the Intergovernmental Internship Cooperative (IIC), whose mission includes the development of the public lands leaders of tomorrow by providing students interested in agency careers with internships and other service and learning opportunities.

With grant funds through the National Park Service – including a shared NPS/SUU staff position – and through working partnerships with the BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and Utah Department of Natural Resources, the Intergovernmental Internship Cooperative has placed dozens of students in paid internship positions within the partnering agencies. These internships include on-the-job experiences in such things as accounting, public affairs, visitor services, interpretation, forest management and fuels reduction projects. Many of these are specific career path placements. This summer, over 90 students are benefitting from these full-time internship opportunities – including an NPS Service Corp crew.

### **IIC's Public Lands Employment Day**

In cooperation with SUU's state and federal land management agency partners, IIC now hosts an annual "Public Lands Employment Day" career fair at SUU. While career fairs are the norm on college campuses, our Public Lands Employment Day spotlights the numerous land management agencies across our region and provides SUU students with the opportunity to learn about and begin the application process for agency employment, particularly in advance of the summer hiring season. Workshops on how

to apply for federal jobs, along with other student training sessions provided by agency staff, are also part of this highly successful career fair.

## **Experiential Learning and Outdoor Engagement**

Over the past year there has been much interest and excitement generated at Southern Utah University through the development of a new Academic Roadmap, under the direction of Provost Brad Cook. Central to this strategic academic direction is the soon-to-be-added experiential learning requirement for graduation. This will require that students participate in specific real-world learning opportunities as part of their SUU experience, and complete a capstone project through one of five Centers for Student Engagement.

In recognition of the importance of the public lands in this region, one of these five centers will be the Center for Outdoor Engagement. (Other Centers include Leadership, Civic Engagement, International Studies, and Creativity and Innovation.)

In addition to the broadened student experience opportunities that will be created through the Outdoor Engagement Center, SUU is also working with Bryce Canyon National Park to create a Semester in the Parks, giving students the rare opportunity to live and learn in a national park, with the park as their classroom. In fact, we already jokingly refer to Bryce Canyon National Park as our “eastern campus.”

## **Alliance for Education Agreements with the National Parks**

The genesis of many of the projects and partnerships of the SUU Outdoor Initiative can be found in the formal *Alliance for Education* agreements executed between SUU and Bryce Canyon National Park and with the Zion Group, consisting of Zion National Park, Cedar Breaks National Monument, and Pipe Springs National Monument.

These respective agreements establish a formal cooperative and mutually beneficial working relationship between SUU and the region’s national parks and monuments. These partnerships provide a world-class education and research venue for SUU students and faculty. In return, the signatory National Parks and monuments get access to the resources and expertise of the University.

As an example of how this agreement furthers the missions of all the entities involved, SUU staff participated on the 2009 Zion Centennial Planning Committee, and SUU faculty, staff, and students planned and participated in numerous activities as part of the 2009 Zion Centennial Celebration.

## **Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument (GSENM) Memorandum of Understanding**

Patterned after the University's successful Alliance for Education agreements with Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks, the objectives of this Memorandum Of Understanding between SUU and Grand Staircase-Escalante NM are to establish a general framework of cooperation upon which mutually beneficial science, research, and education programs; service projects; training seminars; internships; and curriculum development opportunities and other activities may be planned and accomplished in such a ways as to complement the missions of the BLM, GSENM, and SUU, and in the best interest of the public. Since its signature in 2009, numerous activities have occurred at the Monument that benefit students, faculty, staff, monument employees and surrounding communities and their residents.

It is our contention that these unique agreements—the Alliances for Education and the GSENM MOU—positively enhance the University's relationship with our agency partners while formalize our commitment to providing service to the parks and monuments as well as the surrounding communities. In return, SUU students gain an undeniable competitive advantage in their post-education, professional endeavors.

### **The SUU Mountain Ranch and Demonstration Forest**

Southern Utah University is fortunate to own 2,200 acres of mountain forest lands in Cedar Canyon, 12 miles east of the main campus, and near Cedar Breaks National Monument and the Ashdown Gorge Wilderness Area.

A resource management plan for the property has been developed over the past two years focusing on wise management of the property's forest, recreation, range, and grazing resources as well as its research and educational potential.

Through SUU's planning leadership, we have reached out to adjacent landowners – including the U.S. Forest Service – to complete a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. As a result of this wildfire protection planning effort, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds are being used this summer to implement the objectives of this plan using SUU student labor.

One of the outcomes of this planning process is a partnership between Southern Utah University and the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands to create a one-of-a-kind “demonstration forest.” Utilizing the expertise of the State of Utah, along with participation from other universities, sections of this property will be managed as living models of forest health and range management best practices. Forest Service and private property owners alike will be able to view and understand state-of-the-art management techniques, and monitor them over time.

### **Colorado Plateau Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU)**

SUU joins 25 non-federal partners along with seven federal natural resource management agencies to form the Colorado Plateau Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CPCESU).

The CPCEU creates opportunities for research, education and technical assistance to support stewardship of natural and cultural resources by federal agencies on the Colorado Plateau. The CPCEU ensures that the expertise of academic and non-governmental partners is made available to assist federal resource managers in accomplishing their agency missions. SUU students, faculty and staff from across campus have benefitted from this positive relationship, and SUU is recognized as one of the most active CEU members with nearly 20 contracts and agreements in place with agency partners in just the past four years. These agreements take advantage of SUU faculty and staff, and provide students with real-world experiences, to meet the research, work and service needs of the land management agencies.

### **Intergovernmental Coordination – The Southwest Utah Planning Authorities Council**

With the belief that communication and coordination between various levels of government can lead to improved cooperation and better solutions to issues facing southern Utah, Southern Utah University hosts and chairs bi-monthly field trips and meetings during which federal and state agency directors meet with local government officials from throughout the region under the auspices of the Southwest Utah Planning Authorities Council (SUPAC).

SUPAC was established in 1994 by then-Governor Michael O. Leavitt to serve as a non-binding forum for discussion of issues, grievances, misunderstandings, and disputes among the participants, and to serve as a clearinghouse for the exchange of information relative to the planning processes and activities of the participants.

Over the years, this forum has proved to be very beneficial in improving intergovernmental relationships and establishing comfortable lines of communication between public land managers and state and local government leaders.

### **County Resource Management Planning**

Southern Utah University is working with three counties within the region to develop County Resource Management Plans for the public lands within these counties. This is a nationally significant effort to collaboratively and pro-actively address planning and management issues from the local level, utilizing a planning model developed by SUU personnel.

This planning model mirrors in many ways the BLM's Resource Management Planning process, but it is driven by local government and by local perspectives on the impacts and management of public lands resources. It is important to note that these county planning processes are not done in a vacuum, but are done in collaboration with the land management agencies.

### **The Utah Prairie Dog Recovery Implementation Program**

The Utah Prairie Dog – protected as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act since 1973 – has long been a vexing issue for land owners and developers in parts of Southern Utah. Southern Utah University is playing a leading role in bringing together over 20 federal, state, and local partners as part of the Utah Prairie Dog Recovery Implementation Program (UPDRIP). The UPDRIP partners have two primary goals: The first is to recover the Utah prairie dog so that it no longer requires protection under the Endangered Species Act; the second is to allow landowners to develop lands historically inhabited by the prairie dog.

SUU houses and provides administrative support to the Director of UPDRIP within the College of Science. This proximity to the science faculty provides the director with convenient access to academic and scientific expertise to assist in developing and implementing a recovery plan for the prairie dogs.

### **Zion National Park Artist in Residence**

The re-emerging Zion National Park Artist in Residence initiative is a new and exciting partnership between SUU's College of Performing and Visual Arts' Arts Administration Program, Braithwaite Fine Arts Gallery, graduate students in the Master of Fine Arts Program, and Zion National Park. Through the program development and arts expertise of these SUU entities, Zion has been able to re-establish this defunct program and artists from around the world have applied to be selected as an artist in residence. The new and improved Zion NP Artist in Residence Program hosted its first artist in early 2010 at the Park's recently restored Grotto House.

### **Partners in the Parks**

Southern Utah University manages the Partners in the Parks program for the National Collegiate Honors Council. This program is currently recognized by the National Park Service as a 2016 NPS Centennial Initiative Project. This program gives honors students from across the nation the opportunity to have week-long academic and learning experiences within the National Parks.

### **The Utah Rural Summit**

For the past 23 years, Southern Utah University has hosted the annual Utah Rural Summit. This Summit began as a forum for discussing public lands issues, and has since evolved to include economic and community development components as well. At the core of each Summit gathering is a public lands track, in which local and state leaders from across the state have the opportunity to engage in discussion with key leaders and experts on public lands matters from throughout the West.

### **Zion National Park/Danxiashan World Geopark Sister Park**

SUU's Office of Government Relations and Regional Services has been an active partner with Zion National Park in the development of a "sister park" relationship with Danxiashan World Geopark in Guangdong Province, P.R. China. Higher education is a

key component of this relationship, which includes Sun Yat-sen University and SUU. Visits to both parks and universities occurred in late 2009 and early 2010 by delegations from each country.

### **Youth Science and Outdoor Education Director at SUU**

This position at SUU was created in early 2010. Along with oversight of the Cedar Mountain Science Camp program and the University's new Voyager Science Lab, positive success is also being achieved by working with local school districts and public lands agency partners to develop new programs such as the U.S. Forest Service's More Kids in the Woods program, National Park Service's First Bloom program, and numerous other agency-desired partnership projects. In fact, assisting local public lands offices develop these agency-funded programs is a priority for this position. Local agency offices typically do not have the capacity to develop and/or manage these programs that can greatly benefit the community.

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### **SUU Outdoors**

Founded in Spring 2003, SUU Outdoors is home to the publicly accessible Outdoor Center, which offers a wide variety of year-round trips, equipment rentals and training, and other outdoor resources and expertise. The Outdoor Center also manages the on-campus low ropes challenge course and the popular new indoor climbing wall. Other special events are scheduled throughout the school year such as gear swaps and the annual Warren Miller ski film. SUU Outdoors maintains many formal partnerships and affiliations including local organizations such as the Color Country Cycle Club, Cedar Mountain Nordic Ski Club, and the Southern Utah Climbers Coalition.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that Southern Utah University plays a vital role as a partner and resource in public lands matters, bringing personnel, knowledge, talent and leadership to the table. SUU is fully engaged with the federal land management agencies, and with state and local government, in maximizing the opportunities for students, faculty, communities, and the regional economy that flow from our proximity to the vast and beautiful national parks and public lands that surround us.