

September 29, 2009

Rep. Raul M. Grijalva
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests and Public Lands
Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C.

Dear Chairman Grijalva:

Utah has a long history of responsible stewardship of the land, dating back to Native American and early pioneer times. Those who lived here in the past, and continue to live here today, have learned to work with the land, and the arid climate that helped sculpt it, in order to make a living. Today, the livelihood of residents of rural Utah depends on development of the natural resources in the energy and minerals business, outstanding stewardship of the land through comprehensive and coordinated grazing of the land, the natural beauty of the state through the tourism and recreational industries, and, increasingly, from renewable energy resources in the state.

Wilderness, as defined by the United States Congress, has been a contentious issue in Utah for decades. Positions on the issue range from the belief that the designation of Wilderness locks people out of an area and forecloses all economic opportunity on one side, to the assertion that, without Congressional Wilderness, the land and landscapes are lost forever on the other. Neither extreme is accurate. Looking forward, the discussion must move from these unproductive polarized positions to a careful examination of the resources and beauty of the land, human uses of the land, and the best management tools available. Unfortunately, through this long debate, common sense in the management of the land has often been lost.

Before the Subcommittee on October 1, 2009, will be a hearing on H.R. 1925, a bill to designate a huge portion of the State of Utah as Congressional Wilderness. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Maurice Hinchey of New York, is not supported by a single member of the Utah delegation. The amount of land proposed for this designation is overwhelming — it is the approximate equivalent of the size of the State of Maryland. The State of Utah recognizes that the lands proposed for wilderness designation by this bill, lands that are managed by the Bureau of Land Management, are owned by the American people. However, we also find this proposal is, and always has been, an unrealistic and unvetted allocation of the natural resources of this great State. The proposal has not been presented by the sponsor to the many stakeholders in this issue, particularly the rural citizens who feel so passionately about the matter. Nor has the sponsor sought to balance the laudable goal of preserving our stunning scenic resources against the nation's needs for wildlife conservation, recreational pursuits, and energy.

Utah has a history of nuanced collaborative efforts to address thorny issues. I have been active in many such efforts and note that Utah's Lieutenant Governor, Greg Bell, formerly served as the chairman of Envision Utah, an internationally acclaimed honest broker and facilitator for urban, rural and wilderness issues.

The sponsor's proposal has been publicized as a responsible effort by citizens to survey the resources of the State and make a determination of the lands that should be designated Congressional Wilderness. Yet, this result is entirely dependent upon a determination by those citizens that the public lands are roadless, do not contain human intrusions (or those intrusions are substantially unnoticeable), and there are no competing resource needs. Similar comprehensive surveys by local government are ignored, as are efforts by the State and local governments to seek recognition of historical roads. Recent decisions by the federal courts have clarified the nature of these historic roads – cases that postdate the citizens' work in this area.

Management of Congressional Wilderness is also a point of concern for the State. Recent efforts by Utah's delegation on a comprehensive land management bill for Washington County in Southern Utah established that a National Conservation Area, not Congressional Wilderness, is the most appropriate management tool for areas where the desert tortoise lives. In addition, Congressional Wilderness embodies a particular vision for management of the resources through natural processes, a vision that can be at odds with the needs of nearby human uses. This difference came into play in Utah this past summer with a decision to let a lightning-caused fire burn in Congressional Wilderness for some weeks, only to have it flare-up and threaten homes outside the boundaries later in the summer. Active management of the fuel in the forest area, or ignition of a prescribed fire at a more appropriate time of year, may have alleviated the situation, yet was unavailable to the forest land managers.

The State of Utah supports the efforts of Utah's Congressional delegation to seek a balanced review of Utah's lands for wildlife conservation, energy production (including renewable energy resources), recreational pursuits and tourism, and wilderness and other conservation designations. These efforts involve collaboration between conservation advocates, resource stewards such as ranchers and recreational providers, resource users such as energy companies, local governments, and state agencies. The State urges the Chairman to require the sponsor and citizens who have spent time preparing the work behind the bill to engage in these efforts. Only then will a true, workable balance of conservation and human use emerge. Moreover, the huge amount of land targeted by this bill should be addressed on an area-by-area basis, because a one-size-fits-all approach will produce the wrong results. Again, we recommend to you the Washington County experience as a model of nuanced treatment of a spectrum of lands and values affecting those lands.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on a matter of such grave importance, not only to the State of Utah and its citizens, but the entire Intermountain West and the Nation.

Sincerely,

Gary R. Herbert
Governor

Cc: Senator Orrin Hatch
Senator Robert Bennett
Congressmen Jim Matheson
Congressman Rob Bishop
Congressman Jason Chaffetz