

Committee on Resources

Testimony

Testimony on HR 3625

The San Rafael Swell National Heritage and Conservation Act

Governor Michael O. Leavitt, State of Utah

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Lands

April 23, 1998

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today about the San Rafael Swell National Heritage and Conservation Act.

The protection of public lands in the State of Utah is an issue of national significance. The federal government administers more than 65% of the land in the State. These lands include some of the most spectacular scenery to be found anywhere in the world. The public lands in Utah are also host to a variety of activities and uses, and in many cases, the center of a good deal of controversy.

For decades now Utahns, along with many concerned people living outside the state, have waged contentious battles over how these lands should be managed and protected.

In my *State of the State* address in January 1997, I recounted a marvelous event I was privileged to experience here in the nation's capitol. In September of 1993, I was among those gathered on the White House lawn to witness a handshake that would change the course of history as Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin clasped hands in a gesture that bridged decades of bitterness and strife between Israelis and Palestinians with the signing of the Oslo peace accords. Across the street in Lafayette Park, protesters from both sides loudly chanted their objections.

As I told the citizens of my state, "We're not talking about world peace, but our state, for decades has been divided on the wilderness issue. It is time, now, to say enough fighting, to begin building on what unites us. Each of us shares a love for the land, and each of us shares a common desire to preserve sensitive lands. Let us begin with those lands on which there is substantial agreement. I'd like to say to the extremes on both sides of this debate, let's quit protesting in Lafayette Park, come to the table, and after 20 years let's stop fighting and start protecting land."

At that time I proposed a different approach to addressing these issues. I suggested that rather than deal with a state-wide proposal that included enormous acreages and even larger political and emotional stakes, we needed to take a different road. I suggested that we deal with these public lands issues by means of an incremental approach, in which we would deal with areas or regions one at a time, piece by piece, as we worked our way a step at a time toward a total solution.

I have been convinced for a quite some time that if we are going to break the impasse over wilderness and the protection of public lands, we must begin by designating *some* wilderness *somewhere* in order to begin the process. This initial step, this first success, would be a critical catalyst for setting in motion the string of events that could ultimately break the gridlock and move toward resolution.

In presenting this incremental approach, I emphatically stated that it could not be successful unless it were accomplished through valid public processes and active involvement on the part of the numerous stakeholders associated with the issues.

The San Rafael Swell National Heritage and Conservation Act is a remarkable example of the innovation and quality that can occur when public processes are allowed to take root and develop in a natural and healthy way. This proposal is the fruit of years of discussion and soul-searching within Emery County, and in collaboration with an array of stakeholders.

The product of this effort is a proposal that addresses the protection requirements of the lands in a manner that is both far-reaching and environmentally sound. It considers the protection and management needs of an entire ecosystem. It is a unique proposal that could only be designed by those who are closest to the lands and who understand its intricacies and nuances.

This is an excellent example of the virtue of an open incremental approach. It clearly demonstrates the fact that there is indeed much common ground upon which to work.

This proposal is truly a local initiative. It was not developed by outsiders nor by state or federal government agencies. But at the same time, Emery County officials did not do their work behind closed doors. This bill is the result of interaction and input from numerous sources from across the political spectrum.

Its conception occurred as the result of a significant planning process known as the *Emery County Wild Lands Futures Project*. This process, which was sponsored by the Coalition for Utah's Future -- a private non-profit organization working to build consensus on major Utah issues -- received strong support and involvement from my administration. Emery County reluctantly but courageously volunteered to be the pilot county in testing the potential for building consensus in these thorny matters.

The *Wildlands Futures Project* brought an array of stakeholders to the table to participate in facilitated discussions aimed at identifying common interests and shared values with regards to the BLM lands of the San Rafael Swell. Participants included representatives from local, state, and federal agencies, as well as user groups representing recreation, hunting, water development and industrial interests. There were also many significant environmental organizations seated at the table, including the Utah Wilderness Association, the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and the Audubon Society.

It was through these meetings that the walls of mistrust began to crumble, and people in the room discovered that their individual agendas were all driven by the same underlying motivation -- a deep and sincere love for the lands and a desire to do right by them for current and future generations.

Though the process was never completed because of intensified battles from both sides of the issues, important seeds had been planted in Emery County -- seeds Emery County continued to cultivate and nourish, and which today have blossomed into a proposal that is without precedent in the Utah public lands debate.

Consider what Emery County has proposed: Protection of 240,000 acres of wilderness. Areas we would all agree should be wilderness. Beyond wilderness the bill also proposes a National Conservation Area that gives statutory protection to the San Rafael Swell. In a bold step for which they have been widely criticized by many of their sister counties, they have removed the threat of commercial extractive development by proposing to exclude oil drilling, mining, and timbering activities from the Swell.

For many other acres of critical lands that don't quite fit the requirements of wilderness designation, they have innovatively applied an additional layer of protection in the form of semi-primitive non-motorized designation.

To their credit, Emery County officials have looked toward the future, and are proposing to further enhance the value of this public lands resources by creating something very new to Utah -- a National Heritage Area. In doing so, they will be preserving and sharing with the nation an intriguing piece of western American history and culture.

They have also recognized the importance of another significant asset that is part of the San Rafael Swell -- the Desert Bighorn Sheep. Their concept of creating a Desert Bighorn Sheep management area to provide opportunities for public education and observation of these magnificent animals in their natural settings adds an important new dimension of conservation to the National Conservation Area.

All in all, this is a proposal that is environmentally sound and secure. It protects and preserves the lands, the habitat, the wildlife, and the spirit of a spectacularly scenic and varied landscape. It is a proposal that has my full support and encouragement.

It is difficult to overemphasize how important this proposal is toward setting in motion the processes and discussions that can ultimately resolve critical public land concerns within the State of Utah. All eyes are focused upon this bill. If it is successful, it is natural to assume that other successes will follow, and that these successes will follow a similar process of public involvement and environmental sensitivity that will serve both state and national interests.

Indeed, if there can be hope for peace in the Middle East, then surely there can also be hope for meaningful progress in preserving and protecting the national and local interests associated with Utah's spectacular public lands treasure. The San Rafael Swell National Heritage and Conservation Act is certainly a worthy representative to lead the way toward reaching this essential objective. It is my hope that in the very near future we can all clasp hands in another handshake of success that will change the course of the future, and that will leave a lasting legacy for generations to come.

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