

**Testimony of Rep. Jim Matheson on HR 1925 before the National Parks,
Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee
Oct. 1, 2009**

Thank you, Chairman Grijalva, for the opportunity to testify before the Committee regarding the Red Rock Wilderness Act of 2009.

In Utah, there is probably no more contentious public lands issue than the establishment of wilderness areas. In some ways, this is ironic because much of Utah is land that has wild character -- rugged, remote, and isolated by river canyons and deserts. But discussions about wilderness in Utah have usually taken on a polarized dynamic that has led to a great amount of emotional rhetoric, and very little progress.

The 1964 National Wilderness Preservation System Act created the policy of Congress "to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness." It required the public land agencies to inventory their lands and make recommendations to Congress regarding wilderness. On paper, it sounds straightforward. In practice in Utah, it has long been a torturous case of taking two steps back for every step forward. Mr. Chairman, you will hear a tremendous amount of passion from the various witnesses who testify before you today, both for and against the proposed legislation. This passion illustrates the challenges of the polarized debate in Utah. It also oversimplifies the complexity of the issue. There are many, many stakeholders with different perspectives of Utah public land issues. If we want to make progress, a collaborative process that engages all stakeholders must occur.

Since the late 1970s, Utah wilderness proposals have run the gamut—ranging from zero acres –to the bill before you today. That gives you an inkling of how disparate the views are among local elected officials, the state, private land owners, the State Institutional School Trust Lands Administration, ranchers, oil and gas, timber, mining, sportsmen, mountain-bikers, water managers, backcountry horsemen, climbers, Native American tribes, environmentalists and the general public. A wilderness process overseen by my father—Governor Scott Matheson—took seven years. It resulted in the 1984 passage of the Utah Wilderness Act which designated 700,000 acres-- mainly on federal forest land. No one got everything they wanted. But in the end, everyone had a seat at the table for the negotiations and had ownership in the outcome. That is the model of how public lands issues can be resolved. However, that model has rarely been followed in Utah.

There are many examples from other states where a collaborative, bipartisan effort has resulted in consensus wilderness designations. These include the Oregon Badlands Wilderness Act, the Owyhee-Bruneau Wilderness in Idaho, and the Rocky Mountain National Park and Dominguez Canyon Wilderness designations in Colorado.

All of these bills were the result of following a collaborative, inclusive model.

That is the model that was followed when I joined Senator Bob Bennett in a bipartisan effort a few years ago to write the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act. It was an honest attempt to balance diverse points of view. It was not just a wilderness bill. But it did designate more than 256,000 acres of wilderness; the first ever Wild and Scenic River in Utah; removal of a dam site within environmentally-sensitive habitat, establishment of a National Conservation Area for the federally-threatened desert tortoise; and funding for development and enforcement of a dedicated OHV trail. It was contentious and hard-fought. Some local elected officials and some environmental groups actively opposed it initially, but in the end, proclaimed their support. That approach allowed us to address local concerns and specific features of the land. It wasn't easy. But in the end, significant progress on this most contentious public lands issue was achieved.

As we sit here today, other Utah counties are sponsoring local working groups. They are holding discussions about possibly duplicating the Washington County model. Together Senator Bennett and I have established a bipartisan roadmap for future legislative proposals.

As the largest daily newspaper in Utah editorialized this past Sunday, "Wilderness needs to be home-grown." It cannot be the work of only one group of stakeholders, no matter how extensive or sincere. That is a major reason why I do not support HR 1925—it does not reflect the collective views of the many interested stakeholders in Utah. As legislators, our job is to achieve progress. I am committed to being a partner with all stakeholders in a collaborative effort that dissolves gridlock and provides a legacy for future generations.