

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Witness Statement

STATEMENT BEFORE THE INTERIOR HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE
ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND LANDS

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Sub-committee, my name is Wes Curtis. I am a member of the Governor of Utah's senior staff, as well as director of the Governor's Rural Partnership Office. I am here today representing Governor Leavitt and the interests of the State of Utah. I appreciate this opportunity to talk to you about a remarkable proposal for protecting one of the nation's unique public land and heritage treasures -- the San Rafael Swell.

I begin by stating that H.R. 3605, the San Rafael Western Legacy District and National Conservation Area, has the full endorsement and support of Governor Leavitt.

H.R. 3605 is the product of years of work and a long process of public involvement. It is a marvelous manifestation of local initiative acting in the national interest. It 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.

The product of this effort is a proposal that addresses both the protection needs of the public lands, as well as the long-term economic future of the region. 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 proposal is evidence of a positive and courageous attitude on the part of local leaders in Emery County. They have been willing to break ranks with many of their sister counties and actively pursue a legitimate conservation initiative. They have done this because they honestly want to see the "Swell" managed in a responsible manner that will protect all of its resources - both natural and historic.

Consider for a minute what this measure will do:

First, the National Conservation Area will provide comprehensive management for what amounts to an entire eco-system, preserving the integrity of the whole resource.

Second, this proposal withdraws the threats of new oil drilling, mining and timbering from the lands within the NCA boundary - a remarkable concession for a rural county with an economy based on mineral extraction.

Third, it recognizes the new economic realities being faced by rural communities in the West. Thus, it provides an innovative means for helping the region transition from an extractive/resource based economy to a new sustainable economy - while at the same time preserving nationally important historical treasures. This will be accomplished through the creation of a Western Legacy District. Preserving the scenic and historic resources of the Swell is viewed locally as caring for the goose that can lay the golden eggs. It is critical to the future economic viability of the area.

This legislation is viewed as an important step in the direction of environmental protection, as well as being a far-sighted approach to achieving a greater degree of economic sustainability in the San Rafael region.

At this point, I would like to address two other important concepts related to the objectives and intent of this legislation.

The first has to do with the potential for future wilderness designations within the National Conservation Area. This bill has deliberately avoided any attempt to designate any specific lands as wilderness because there are other processes in motion - on the part of the BLM and others - that will ultimately determine which lands will receive such designation.

It is important to note that this bill is "wilderness neutral." It does not affect nor delay these wilderness review processes in any way. It allows the wilderness issue to be dealt with through the processes and mechanisms that are already in place, without hampering nor hindering those processes.

In that context, it is also important to note that this bill does not contain any wilderness release language, so no lands with wilderness potential are adversely affected by this legislation.

What this bill does do is provide a much higher degree of protection for these lands during the time that wilderness issues are being reviewed and debated - namely, withdrawal from mining and drilling. This bill is not a compromise on the wilderness issue nor is it an attempt to circumvent wilderness processes. It simply, and deliberately, does not deal with the issue. It is, however, an important step forward - a step toward protecting these lands until these issues are ultimately resolved.

The second issue I wish to address has to do with the management of off-road vehicle use within the San Rafael Swell. I can assure you that the state of Utah, along with the local citizens of the San Rafael Region, are very concerned about the damage that is being caused by the misuse of OHVs. It is reassuring to note that there is strong local support for addressing this concern and for taking action to "stop the bleeding."

For this reason Emery County has formally asked the BLM to address this issue and to develop a comprehensive transportation management plan for the area as soon as possible. Emery County recognizes that this issue must be addressed whether or not

this legislation passes. The BLM has responded affirmatively, and is already moving forward in addressing the OHV issue.

It needs to be clearly understood that implementation of a BLM OHV management plan will not have to

wait on the four year planning process associated with the National Conservation Area. These wheels are already in motion under existing NEPA processes.

In conclusion, may I repeat that this legislation takes an important step forward in the conservation and management of one of the nation's most important natural and historic resources. At the same time, it is also sensitive and innovative in dealing with future economic needs of the affected region. There is no downside to this proposal. Passage of this legislation just simply makes good sense.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for providing the opportunity to address this committee.

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