

Washington, DC - Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today led a letter from a group of 89 members of the U.S. House of Representatives calling on Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to protect Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands proposed for wilderness designation in Utah while Congress continues to work on measures to legislatively protect 9.4 million acres of public, wilderness quality land in the state. The letter comes a month after a House Committee on Natural Resources hearing that examined Hinchey's America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, H.R. 1925. In that hearing, members of the Utah congressional delegation, the director of the BLM, and various stakeholders all agreed on the importance of designating wilderness in Utah, but differed on how it should be done.

"While there are some differences of opinion on how to protect Utah's remarkably beautiful landscape, there is a consensus that millions of acres within the state warrant wilderness protection," Hinchey said. "Given the common belief that much of this land should be safeguarded, it makes sense for the Interior Department to step in and temporarily protect these lands while Congress and state officials sort out the best way to protect these precious acres for this and future generations of Americans to enjoy and admire. These are the very scenic lands that the previous administration hoped to turn into off-road vehicle playgrounds and oil and gas fields. Implementing the recommendations we set forward in our letter will help restore balance while the legislative process moves forward."

The letter sent today stresses the importance of protecting wild landscapes and ultimately designating wilderness in Utah. It asks Salazar to direct the BLM to exercise its authority and administratively protect those lands, most of which BLM itself recognizes as wilderness quality, until Congress passes a final wilderness bill for Utah.

Included among the recommendations contained in the letter to Salazar is the rejection of a 2003 out-of-court settlement between the BLM and the state of Utah (known as the "Norton-Leavitt wilderness settlement") that curtailed the BLM's ability to provide interim protection for wilderness-quality lands. This non-binding backroom deal was widely criticized at the time and broke with years of Interior Department policies which had long protected wilderness-quality lands. The settlement set the stage for the Bush administration to promote oil and gas drilling and off-road vehicle use above all other uses of the public lands – a policy embodied in six controversial Resource Management Plans for eastern and southern Utah that threw the majority of these wilderness-quality lands open to oil speculators, dirt bikers and miners.

"As Congress debates the best means of preserving Utah's unprotected wilderness, these lands remain at risk," Hinchey and his 88 House colleagues wrote to Salazar. "We respectfully request that you exercise the considerable authority granted to the Secretary of the Interior under existing laws to protect the wilderness qualities of these lands until Congress sees to their protection."

Hinchey's America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would ensure that 9.4 million acres of wilderness in southern Utah remain in their natural state, and strictly prohibit mining, road and dam construction, off-road vehicle use, and other activities that would destroy the area's special character. Non-consumptive uses such as hunting, fishing, camping, backpacking, hiking, and horseback riding would continue to be permitted and encouraged. Grazing rights existing at the time of any wilderness designation would also be unaffected. Currently, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages the 9.4 million acres.

In 1989, Utah Congressman Wayne Owens introduced the original version of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. After Owens retired he asked Hinchey to introduce the legislation, which the congressman began doing in 1994. U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) did the same beginning in 1997. Hinchey and Durbin reintroduced the bipartisan America's Red Rock Wilderness Act in April 2009.

The publicly owned wild places of Utah are world-renowned for their spectacular beauty with deep, narrow red rock canyons, fantastic sandstone arches, tremendous open vistas, and wild rivers. Currently, only 1.1 percent of Utah's BLM public lands are protected as wilderness. Such intact wilderness-quality lands cannot be found anywhere else in the lower 48 states. Utah's red rock country is also rich with archeological remnants of prehistoric cultures.

Joining Hinchey in sending the letter to Salazar were U.S. Reps. John Olver (D-MA), Jim Moran (D-VA), Jackie Speier (D-CA), Sander Levin (D-MI), Steve Israel (D-NY), John Hall (D-NY), Charlie Rangel (D-NY), Lois Capps (D-CA), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), Edward Markey (D-MA), Rush Holt (D-NJ), Nita Lowey (D-NY), Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL), Shelley Berkley (D-NV), Jim Langevin (D-RI), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Keith Ellison (D-MN), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Elijah Cummings (D-MD), Betty McCollum (D-MN), Paul Hodes (D-NH), Fortney Pete Stark (D-CA), Gwen Moore (D-WI), Sam Farr (D-CA), Brian Baird (D-WA), Adam Smith (D-WA), John Tierney (D-MA), Joseph Sestak (D-PA), Timothy Walz (D-MN); Phil Hare (D-IL), Howard Berman (D-CA), Michael Honda (D-CA), Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), José Serrano (D-NY), John Conyers, Jr. (D-MI), George Miller (D-CA), Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Jerry Costello (D-IL), Gerald Connolly (D-VA), Donald Payne (D-NJ), Barney Frank (D-MA), Eric Massa (D-NY), Andre Carson (D-IN), John Lewis (D-GA), Brian Higgins (D-NY), Jim McGovern

(D-MA), Lynn Woolsey (D-CA), Barbara Lee (D-CA), Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), Mike Quigley (D-IL), Lloyd Doggett (D-TX), Niki Tsongas (D-MA), Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (D-MP), Michael Capuano (D-MA), Laura Richardson (D-CA), David Wu (D-OR), Emanuel Cleaver (D-MO), Steve Rothman (D-NJ), Carol Shea-Porter (D-NH), Danny K. Davis (D-IL), Hank Johnson, Jr. (D-GA), Corrine Brown (D-FL), Wm. Lacy Clay (D-MO), Gary Ackerman (D-NY), Adam Schiff (D-CA), Paul Tonko (D-NY), Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ), Jerry McNerney (D-CA), Jared Polis (D-CO), Judy Biggert (R-IL), Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), Jim McDermott (D-WA), Richard Neal (D-MA), Betty Sutton (D-OH), Bobby L. Rush (D-IL), Grace Napolitano (D-CA), Carolyn Kilpatrick (D-MI), Brad Miller (D-NC), David Price (D-NC), Martin Heinrich (D-NM), Timothy V. Johnson (R-IL), Henry Waxman (D-CA), Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), Alcee Hastings (D-FL), Jay Inslee (D-WA), Dan Lipinski (D-IL), and William Delahunt (D-MA).

The letter from Hinchey and his 88 House colleagues to Salazar follows:

November 10, 2009

Honorable Ken Salazar, Secretary

Department of the Interior

1849 C Street, N.W.

Washington DC 20240

Dear Mr. Secretary:

At an October 1, 2009 hearing of the House National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee, Congress had the opportunity to hear testimony on the bill, H.R. 1925, "America's Red Rock Wilderness Act." Nearly all of what we heard was constructive dialogue coming from both sides of this debate. Most of the debate focused on how to protect these wild lands, as opposed to whether these lands deserved protection. This is a very positive development and we hope to work with you and others to take advantage of this opportunity to protect some of our nation's pristine wild and public lands.

As was made clear in this hearing, there are multiple paths to protecting these public lands, including more geographically focused alternatives. While we continue to support a statewide solution, we are also open to some of these different approaches. As we work in Congress on determining how to protect the wild public lands identified in H.R. 1925, we request that you utilize the considerable authorities granted to you under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and other statutes to administratively protect the wilderness characteristics of the lands contained in the Red Rock legislation until Congress acts to protect them statutorily.

This would mean, first and foremost, renouncing the so-called "Norton settlement agreement" with the State of Utah that bars the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) from identifying and protecting BLM lands possessing wilderness characteristics as wilderness study areas, and directing the BLM to abide by previous policies directing the BLM to so-designate suitable areas. In particular, BLM should reconsider the decision not to designate and protect Wilderness Study Areas in the six recently completed resource management plans governing BLM lands in Utah. Designation of wilderness study areas is a crucial means of interim protection that enjoys the recognition of agency professionals and the laws under which they operate, such as the Federal Onshore Oil & Gas Leasing Act and the National Landscape Conservation System Act.

We also urge you to protect these lands by:

- Completing a thorough wilderness inventory of lands proposed for protection;

- Barring oil and gas leasing and development on the lands that would be designated as

wilderness in the Red Rock bill;

·Segregating and withdrawing these lands from mining claim location; and

·Prohibiting uses on these lands that would be incompatible with wilderness protection, such as off-road vehicle use, logging, road construction, etc.

As Congress debates the best means of preserving Utah's unprotected wilderness, these lands remain at risk. We respectfully request that you exercise the considerable authority granted to the Secretary of the Interior under existing laws to protect the wilderness qualities of these lands until Congress sees to their protection.

Sincerely, Maurice Hinchey & his 88 House colleagues