

Bill Enjoys Broad, Bipartisan Support; Would Safeguard 9.4 Million Acres of Public Land in Utah

Washington, DC - In an effort to preserve 9.4 million acres of Utah's spectacular red rock country as wilderness, Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) and U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) today introduced legislation in the House and Senate that would ensure the public land remains in its natural, undeveloped state. Hinchey and Durbin's bipartisan America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which was introduced with 105 cosponsors in the House and 15 in the Senate, would protect the land from commercial development, motorized vehicles, road building, as well as oil and gas drilling. Currently, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) owns the 9.4 million acres, but the agency is not prohibited from selling part of the land for development or developing parts itself.

"I think we have a better shot at passing this important bill now than we've had since Congressman Wayne Owens first introduced it 20 years ago," Hinchey said. "With a Congress that is more deeply committed to conservation efforts and a president who understands the importance of protecting our country's most precious land, I am very hopeful that we can move this important piece of legislation forward. This measure would protect a national treasure by ensuring that a portion of Utah's spectacular red rock country remains in its current wilderness for this and all future generations of Americans to enjoy and cherish."

Durbin said, "I believe it is the responsibility of Congress to ensure that these fragile lands of magnificent beauty, which already belong to the public, do not fall victim to oil, gas and mining interests, increased commercial development, and proposals to construct roads, utility lines, and dams. We are the stewards of these creations and our legislation will help achieve this important goal."

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. Nowhere else in the lower 48 states can such intact wilderness-quality lands be found. These areas are a haven for outdoor recreationists, backpackers, hikers, wildlife enthusiasts, and many more. The red rock area is also rich with archeological remnants of prehistoric cultures.

The original version of the America's Red Rock Wilderness Act was introduced in 1989 by

former Utah Congressman Wayne Owens. After Owens retired he asked Hinchey to introduce the legislation, which the congressman began doing in 1994. Durbin did the same beginning in 1997. The bill is based on an extensive survey conducted by volunteers from the Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC). This public inventory, called the "UWC Citizen's Proposal," found that the BLM had overlooked or ignored vast areas of wild country in the agency's original inventory. As additional inventory work has been conducted for the Citizen's Proposal, the America's Red Rock Wilderness Act has been updated to reflect the latest findings. The new version of the bill proposes protections for roughly 9.4 million acres of BLM public land in Utah.

The America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would ensure the 9.4 million acres in Utah remain wild 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 be permitted and grazing rights existing at the time of any wilderness designation would also be unaffected.

The measure is endorsed by the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance in Utah, and more than 240 local and national conservation groups with the Utah Wilderness Coalition.