

Today, the House Committee on Natural Resources' Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands held a hearing on H.R. 1925, America's Red Rock Wilderness Act of 2009. I've sponsored this important piece of legislation every session of Congress since 1994. I had the opportunity to testify on the merits of the bill at today's hearing. Here is what I said:

"Mr. Chairman, thank you for scheduling this hearing today on America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. Thank you to the witnesses who will be speaking later who traveled here today from Utah to speak about the Red Rock bill. We greatly appreciate you taking the time from your busy lives to come to Washington, DC to discuss this important legislation.

"The first version of the Red Rock bill was introduced in 1989 by the late Wayne Owens, who was a distinguished member of the House of Representatives from Utah and a good friend. When Wayne Owens left Congress in 1993, he asked me to continue introducing his bill, which I considered an honor. A lot has changed since, but we're still working to protect wild public lands in Utah and this year's bill reflects updated inventory information.

"The Red Rock bill is one of the great examples of a citizen-led initiative. The bill was developed in response to the Bureau of Land Management's initial wilderness inventory in the 1980s that significantly undervalued the public wilderness resources in the state. Countless volunteers put in thousands of hours documenting the millions of acres and drawing boundaries around those areas that qualified as wilderness. This still stands as one of the largest non-governmental inventories of land ever.

"We are now in the twentieth year of this effort but it is just the latest chapter in a nearly 140 year effort to protect and preserve our nation's most pristine natural resources for generations to come. The first success in this effort was achieved in 1872 with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park. And yet, despite the vast amount of time that has elapsed since that great event, many of the arguments against this bill are the same ones that were made over a century ago when the first parcels of wilderness were designated for protection. There has always been a desire to push short-term, private interests over long-term, public interests. A century ago it was loggers trying to chop down the giant red woods; today it is the oil and gas industry trying to dig up the red rocks. Those of us who believe we should preserve our natural treasures for future generations have an obligation to do all that we can to continue the efforts of those individuals like Teddy Roosevelt who fought so hard to protect our wild lands.

"The Red Rock bill would designate as wilderness over 9 million acres of public lands, owned by the American people and managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Just as the Grand Canyon situated in the State of Arizona belongs to all of us, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge situated in Alaska belongs to all of us, so to do the splendid public lands in Utah that are the subject of this wilderness bill.

"The areas protected in this legislation are some of the great landscapes the world has ever

seen. They include the vast areas of roadless desert in Tule Valley, red rock formations in Fisher Towers, and awe-inspiring Desolation Canyon, which is the single largest area in my bill. These lands are rich with archaeological remnants of prehistoric cultures and they are a haven for outdoor recreation enthusiasts, scientists, hikers, educators, wildlife enthusiasts, and many more.

"While photos do not do these great vistas justice, I have brought some along so that those present can see what we are trying to protect.

"They include:

1. The Tule Valley and Cricket Mountains in Millard County
2. The Fisher Towers in Grand County
3. Desolation Canyon in Uintah County

"The Bureau of Land Management has already verified that over 75 percent of the public lands protected by this legislation have wilderness characteristics, through its past inventories of the land. This is a remarkable fact given the lack of progress on wilderness protection that we saw over the past eight years under the previous administration. The majority of the remaining lands have not received an updated inventory analysis, but we are confident that they will qualify if and when that new analysis takes place.

"To further put this legislation into perspective, we have to note that the lands that would be designated for wilderness by this bill encompass approximately 40 percent of the 23 million acres of public land inside Utah's border. The remainder of the public lands in Utah will still be open for development.

"Given the beauty and the awe these great landscapes inspire, support for protecting these public lands is widespread. The legislation before us has 146 bipartisan cosponsors. It has been endorsed by over 200 national, regional and local organizations. These are not just environmental organizations; they include recreation organizations, business groups, and religious communities.

"Support for this legislation is not limited to us "outsiders." There is also clear and growing support within Utah to protect these public lands. The bill itself was developed by Utahns. Multiple Utah newspapers, including the Salt Lake Tribune, have editorialized in support of more BLM wilderness in Utah. And a statewide poll of Utah residents conducted in the first week of September by Dan Jones and Associated, a respected research company based in Salt Lake City, found that over 60 percent of those surveyed supported designating as wilderness between 9 million and 23 million acres of the of public lands in Utah.

"Members of ten different religious communities in Utah worked together to create an interfaith

statement about the about the spiritual importance of Utah's wild lands and the need for action to protect these special places.

"Finally, protecting these public lands is not limited to a political party or ideology. The witnesses who are testifying in support of the Red Rock bill are evidence of that. Their views span the spectrum from the left, center, and right. They are all respected statesmen from Utah and we should strongly consider their views on the underlying legislation and the importance of designating these public lands as wilderness.

"Opponents of this bill will try to detail it to death. They'll talk about how this is a proposal pushed by outsiders, but as I've already indicated that is hardly the case. They'll claim it blocks access to critical oil and gas resources, yet the Red Rock lands hold less than a few days worth of oil and a few weeks worth of gas, according to the Energy Information Agency. This is less than 1 percent of the nation's oil reserves and less than 2 percent of the nation's gas reserves. Additionally, the industry already has more than 5 million acres of oil and gas leases in Utah, yet only 1.5 million, or 30 percent, of those leased lands are actually in production.

"Some may even try to argue that there are no maps to identify which lands this bill affects. In case there is any confusion, here is a map of the lands we are discussing.

"I could continue, but I think the point is clear. These are small arguments designed to distract us from addressing a big responsibility.

"Fortunately, we have seen a lot of progress on wilderness designation in Utah over the last twenty years. Some of the people who are opposed to this bill support alternative methods to protecting wilderness, like the Washington County bill that passed in the Omnibus Public Lands Act earlier this year.

"I, and others I work with, am absolutely open to alternative methods for protecting our wild public lands in Utah. However, I am concerned that if we choose a small piecemeal strategy for protecting the lands in the Red Rock bill, by designating a few hundred thousand acres each Congress, it could take at least another twenty years before we designate as wilderness just 50 percent the precious resources we seek to protect in this bill.

"While I know the bill and its supporters are in this for the long-haul, I find this unacceptable. That is why I will continue to push this legislation.

"Many people are asking, why are we even having this hearing today? My response to that is that it couldn't come at a more important time. The great wild lands of Utah that are owned by the American people are under threat.

"At the tail end of the previous administration, BLM released six resource management plans that would decimate the lands we seek to protect in this bill by opening 2.5 million acres of the lands to oil and gas development and designating over 3500 miles of new off-road vehicle routes. While these management plans are legally deficient and will likely be overturned, they exemplify the need for Congress to permanently protect these wild public lands.

"It is fitting that we are having this hearing while PBS is airing Ken Burns's new documentary The National Parks, America's Best Idea. While we aren't seeking to establish new parks, the sentiment is the same -- that the most special places in the nation should be preserved, not for royalty or the rich, but for everyone."