

AMERICA'S RED ROCK WILDERNESS ACT

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (S.1320/H.R. 3031)

would add more than 8 million acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands in Utah to the National Wilderness Preservation System. This remarkable landscape is a key component of what scientists say is urgently needed today: wild lands set aside to exist in their natural state to protect ecosystems and prevent catastrophic climate change. This bill would designate as wilderness the unprotected portions of Labyrinth and Desolation Canyons along with equally remarkable places like the Book Cliffs, the Dirty Devil, and parts of Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears National Monuments.

Nowhere else in the lower 48 can such intact wilderness-quality desert lands be found; they serve as a vital link in the interconnected chain of largely undisturbed ecosystems running from the Grand Canyon to Glacier National Park, providing important migration corridors for wildlife. Unfortunately, this national treasure is threatened by rampant off-road vehicle use, inappropriate energy development, vegetation removal projects, and other shortsighted management and policy decisions.

The time to act is now.



A Visionary Proposal with National and Local Support

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (ARRWA) was developed by activists and volunteers who exhaustively researched, field-checked, and documented what remains of Utah's wild canyon country. The proposal is supported by the Utah Wilderness Coalition, which includes the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and many other conservation groups, businesses, and environmental justice organizations. The bill's sponsors are Representative Melanie Stansbury in the House and Senator Dick Durbin in the Senate.

In Utah, support for public lands conservation and outdoor recreation remains robust. A 2024 poll conducted by Colorado College's State of the Rockies Project found that in Utah:

- **84% support creating new national parks**, national monuments, national wildlife refuges, and tribal protected areas.
- **70% prefer leaders place more emphasis on protecting water, air, wildlife habitat**, and recreation opportunities over maximizing available land for drilling and mining
- **82% think more emphasis should be placed on conserving wildlife migration routes** than on new development, roads, ranching, or oil and gas production in those areas



WHY AMERICA'S RED ROCK WILDERNESS NEEDS PROTECTING

Mitigating Climate Change

Peer-reviewed research shows that ARRWA makes a significant contribution to mitigating climate change. Scientists estimate that the lands proposed for protection currently **sequester and store 247 million metric tons of organic carbon in plants and soils—a number that would likely grow by 10 percent if the lands remain undisturbed into the coming decades.** Protecting these wild landscapes keeps fossil fuels in the ground accounting for a meaningful amount of the carbon mitigation needed to limit global warming to 1.5°Celsius. Wilderness designation would help preserve flows in the Colorado River Basin by preventing surface-disturbing activities that cause windborne dust to coat snowpack, melting it faster and earlier.

Benefiting Local Communities

Studies show that the **protection of public land helps to diversify and enhance local economies by preserving natural landscapes, recreational opportunities, clean air, and clean water that make rural communities attractive places to live, work, and invest.** Voters across the political spectrum (74% of Republicans, 84% of Independents, and 96% of Democrats) say that a candidate's position on conservation is an important factor in determining their support. A wide range of businesses - ranging from major outdoor equipment manufacturers to bed and breakfast owners, to outfitters - support ARRWA because it protects wild places while complementing the regional economy. Utah ranks 9th in the nation for percentage (3.2%) of state GDP from outdoor recreation.

Sheltering and Connecting Wildlife

Spanning craggy mountain peaks, high plateaus, and the world-famous canyon country, the **lands contained in ARRWA have long been recognized as some of the most extraordinary wild landscapes on the planet.** They contain at least two dozen endangered or sensitive species, including unique plant communities and a large number of bee species found nowhere else. In addition, these lands play a vital role in connecting ecosystems, conserving parts of five key wildlife corridors and serving as a lifeline for pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, black bears, mountain lions, and other animals. The diverse topography also provides critical climate refugia: areas where plants and animals can weather abrupt environmental changes. Action is essential, estimates say that 70-80% of refugia are unprotected.

Protecting Cultural Sites

Southern Utah is a region of extraordinary cultural significance to **many Native Americans Tribes who have ancestral ties to the area; indigenous communities continue their traditions and remain an integral part of the landscape today.** According to the Utah Professional Archaeological Council, which has endorsed ARRWA, “maintaining roadless areas is the largest and least costly deterrent to pothunting, inadvertent driving over sites, and vandalism.” A coalition of five tribal nations successfully led efforts to designate Bears Ears National Monument, which includes over 983,000 acres of ARRWA-proposed wilderness. The bill was endorsed by the Navajo Nation Council (2021) and by the Hopi Tribal Council (2023 - in a historic first, the resolution was written in the Hopi language).



THREATS TO AMERICA'S RED ROCK WILDERNESS

Climate Change

Climate change is predicted to wreak havoc in the desert southwest over the coming century, disrupting and degrading the well-being of wildlife, plants, and humans. Already, we're seeing shrinking and damaged water resources, larger and hotter wildfires, increased soil erosion and subsequent dust storms, the spread of non-native plants, wildlife stress, and habitat fragmentation. Activities that occur on unprotected public lands - including off-road vehicle recreation, road construction, oil and gas development, vegetation treatments, and grazing - only exacerbate these impacts. The best strategy for making public lands as resilient as possible to these effects is to preserve the integrity of undisturbed, intact landscapes such as those proposed for wilderness under ARROWA.



Destructive Off-Road Vehicle Use

Off-road vehicle (ORV) use is one of the most pervasive threats to the redrock wilderness. It fragments wildlife habitat and degrades scarce desert streams, muddying and polluting water that is critical to the survival of over 80% of the area's wildlife species. Research also shows that ancient cultural artifacts are more likely to be vandalized or looted if an ORV route is nearby. When travel management plans for Utah's BLM lands were updated in 2008, they blanketed the state with over 20,000 miles of ORV routes—including 3,000 miles of routes in proposed wilderness; many of these routes were nothing more than faded mining tracks, wildlife trails, streambeds, and canyon bottoms. Conservation groups have been working to replace this reckless, unbalanced management approach with a careful, science-based planning process until Congress permanently protects these lands as wilderness.



Fossil Fuel Leasing and Development

Short-term, extractive interests have long set their sites on Southern Utah's public lands. Most recently, the Trump administration's "energy dominance" agenda attempted to blanket the area with oil and gas leases. It only partially succeeded due to lawsuits brought by conservation groups, but the oil and gas industry has still managed to stockpile nearly 1.5 million acres of federal land in Utah—little of which is under development and showing that new leasing is clearly unnecessary. According to the US Geological Survey, about one-quarter of all US carbon emissions come from fossil fuels extracted from public lands. The millions of acres of proposed wilderness, once protected through legislation, can help mitigate the worst effects of climate change, instead of making impacts worse.



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A Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Utah

