

BUSH ADMINISTRATION CEMENTS LEGACY OF DESTRUCTION FOR UTAH'S ICONIC REDROCK LANDSCAPE

In its waning hours, the Bush Administration has put the spectacular redrock lands of southern Utah on the chopping block, cementing this administration's legacy of rolling back protections on public lands, increasing oil and gas drilling at all costs, and catering to the single-minded demands of off-road vehicle (ORV) enthusiasts, while giving short shrift to preservation of the country's natural heritage. After seven years in the making and millions of dollars paid to contractors, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has released six Resource Management Plans (RMPs) that will dictate how 11 million acres of iconic canyon country will be managed for the next two decades. These plans prescribe:

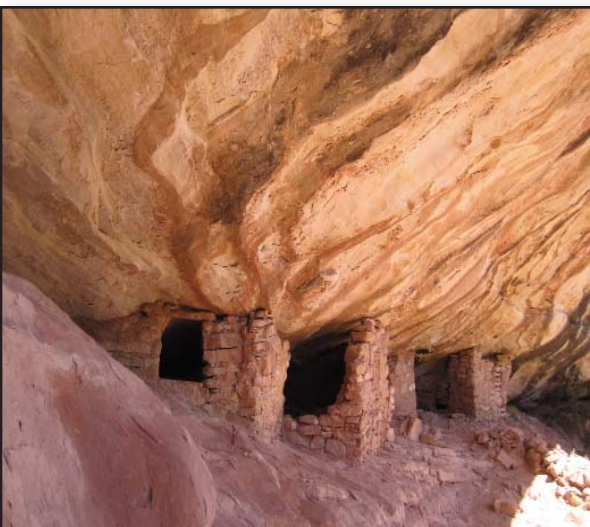
- How wildlands and roadless areas will be managed;
- Where oil and gas drilling, waste pits, and other industrial developments will be allowed;
- Where ORV use will be permitted;
- How wildlife habitat, desert streams, and ancient archaeological treasures will be protected;
- And, what steps the agency will take to lessen the effects of climate change on these arid desert ecosystems.

The BLM released these six Utah plans in a dizzying flurry—one plan almost every week from August 1 to September 5, 2008. Although each plan technically has a 30-day protest period, the reality is that with only seven days separating the release dates, the public has only one week between each protest deadline to review and digest the plan and submit a

protest letter to the BLM, detailing concerns and inadequacies in the plans. At over 1,000 pages each, it is simply an impossible task. However, as the lifespan of these plans is 15-20 years, the long-term ramifications of the plans are significant – they control the destiny of the world-renowned canyon country of southern Utah for the next generation.

WILDERNESS - GOING, GOING, GONE

The plans confirm that 2.8 million acres of currently unprotected lands retain wilderness value – lands that should have been designated as Wilderness Study Areas over 30 years ago, but were somehow overlooked by BLM. Better late than never, this means that the agency has now validated 87% of the lands proposed for wilderness designation in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. **The bad news is that the BLM proposes limited protections for only 16% of these BLM roadless lands while offering up 85%, or 2.3 million acres of these roadless areas, as a gift to oil companies and as playgrounds for jeeps, 4-wheelers and rock crawlers.**



Archeological site on Cedar Mesa © Liz Thomas/SUWA

Wildlands on the chopping block include Bridger Jack Mesa bordering Canyonlands National Park, Muddy Creek and Red Desert next to Capitol Reef National Park, and Bullfrog and Moqui canyons adjacent to Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

ROUTES HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE – ACCESS OR EXCESS?

The plans designate over 20,000 miles of dirt routes—including 1,600 miles of routes within the 2.8 million acres of agency-identified roadless areas. Rather than minimize impacts to wildlife habitat, streams and watersheds, and cultural resources, the plans legitimize every track and trail

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Factory Butte © Tom Till



visible on the ground, including streambeds, decades old abandoned mining trails, old energy exploration tracks, user-created jeep trails, and other trails that have almost disappeared from years of disuse. This “travel planning process” went horribly awry and will funnel 4x4s and ATVs into remote areas where quiet and naturalness now prevail. Especially hard hit: Labyrinth Canyon along the Green River, Indian Creek by Canyonlands National Park, Upper Kanab Creek near the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, and Parunuweap Canyon next to Zion National Park. **Protecting all of the lands proposed for wilderness in America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act would leave 85% of the ORV routes open.**



Proposed routes (in red) will destroy solitude along the Green River and in side canyons in the Labyrinth Canyon proposed wilderness area.

EXISTING PROTECTIONS – POOF! GONE

The new plans roll back important protections for wildlife, sensitive species and cultural resources. For example, the BLM is charged by law to prioritize designation and protection of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) to protect specific resources like critical species of wildlife, archaeological resources, or fragile or unique geologic formations. The BLM has declared war on these ACEC protections, removing ACEC protections from almost ½ million acres of land that was previously protected by ACEC designation—threatening resources and places like the irreplaceable ancestral Puebloan ruins at Cedar Mesa.

ORV ZONES OF DESTRUCTION

The BLM is blindly designating unmanageable play areas where motorized dirt bikes and 4-wheelers will be allowed to run roughshod over the landscape unhindered by the pesky designated trails rule – at a terrible cost to streams, plants, animals, soils and pristine naturalness. The existing motor vehicle restrictions at Factory Butte are being cast aside to appease ORV riders with little desire to protect the resident cacti that are on the federal threatened and endangered list. White Wash sand dunes near Moab and the coral pink dunes in the Moquith Mountain Wilderness Study Area near Kanab—both adorned with endemic dune vegetation—will also be no-holds-barred cross-country play areas to satisfy the small but vocal minority’s demand for “no rules” recreation.

DRILL BABY DRILL!!

The new plans prescribe that 80% of these 11 million acres will be available to oil and gas development. Exploration, drilling, and access road construction will put at risk premier Fremont rock art sites in Nine Mile Canyon and wilderness character lands near the Green River in Desolation Canyon. The rapacious appetites of the oil companies and the Bush Administration threaten to destroy what cannot be replaced—the legacy of Utah’s wild lands. **If BLM would protect all of the wild land it identified, 86% of the proposed oil and gas wells could still be drilled.**

In sum, these plans were written to advance an extremist philosophy of public lands management that values industry over people, motors over wildlife, streams and natural landscapes, and backroom dealing over public participation. The BLM is rushing to issue final decisions on these plans by November 2008, under the radar when media and public attention will be focused on the presidential election. For more information on the Moab, Monticello, Price, Richfield, Kanab or Vernal plans, please go to www.suwa.org/rmp.



Desolation Canyon © Ray Bloxham.