



## Utah's Redrock Wilderness

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THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

# Too Wild to Drill

# Utah's Redrock Wilderness

## What's at Stake?

**A**lthough much of Utah remains wild today, only approximately 1 million acres of this vast state are protected as wilderness. Citizens have identified as qualifying for wilderness protection an additional 9.5 million acres of wild federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Utah. These lands of uncommon beauty include world-renowned slickrock canyons, stunning cliffs, splendid mountains, and startling rock formations. Many of these places have been virtually untouched by human development, save for dwellings and petroglyphs made centuries ago by ancient Puebloan Indians. These unspoiled wildlands, known as America's Redrock Wilderness, deserve permanent protection for future generations, including hikers, travelers, and others explorers.

Unfortunately, the oil and gas industry has set its destructive sights on much of southern and eastern Utah, targeting it as one of the next gold rushes for oil and gas drilling. And the BLM is scrambling to accelerate the drilling approval process. At risk are some of the last great unprotected natural areas in the West and important parts of America's Redrock Wilderness. Places in the industry's crosshairs include Labyrinth Canyon (just west of the modern day tourist hub of Moab), an area where river runners can enjoy a land-

scape unchanged from that which John Wesley Powell saw during his voyage of discovery in 1869. The BLM has also sold leases in the Desolation Canyon area, another iconic recreational site that the BLM itself raved about in its 1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory, when it called the canyon "wild, remote, expansive, and rugged."

Also within industry's crosshairs is a proposed historic district near Nine Mile Canyon, home to one of the most significant collections of Native American petroglyphs in the United States, as well as other historic resources that represent the lives of early settlers and ranchers in Utah. In 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed Nine Mile Canyon as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, in part because of concerns about the harmful effects of energy development in the Nine Mile Canyon area.

With each of its quarterly lease sales, the Utah BLM seemingly ups the ante by selling off public treasures that are of great historical and natural significance. In August 2006, for example, the agency auctioned off land near Arches National Park against the wishes of the National Park Service, which wrote that "...potential impacts include light pollution from flaring and lighting drill rigs or production facilities which dilutes the night skies, an important park value." ■

## Protection Status

**I**n 1985, after extensive field research by scores of citizen volunteers, Utah conservationists announced a "Citizens' Proposal" to protect over five million acres of BLM land in Utah within the National Wilderness Preservation System. In 1999, that Citizens' Proposal was updated after an intensive, two-year-long "re-inventory" process that encompassed the entire state resulting in today's 9.5-million-acre America's Redrock Wilderness proposal. More than 240 local and national environmental groups have endorsed the Citizens' Proposal by joining forces with the Utah Wilderness Coalition.

In 1989, the Citizens' Proposal was introduced into Congress as a bill by former Utah Congressman Wayne Owens, and in 1993, was reintroduced as "America's Redrock Wilderness Act" by Representative Maurice Hinchey of New York. In 1997, Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois introduced S. 773, the Senate version of America's Redrock Wilderness Act. In the 109th Congress, America's Redrock Wilderness Act has been reintroduced as H.R. 1774 in the House and S. 882 in the Senate—with the support of 161 Representatives and 17 Senators. ■

## Why is Utah's Redrock Wilderness at Risk?

**F**rom its 1996-99 "re-inventory" of Utah lands, the BLM determined that an additional 2.6 million acres (above and beyond the existing 3.4 million acres of Wilderness Study Areas) in the state were wilderness quality. During the last two years of the Clinton administration and the first two years of the Bush administration, the Interior Department followed a policy of not leasing these re-inventoried wilderness-quality lands. That prudent policy ended with the 2003 "no more wilderness" settlement agreement between the Interior Department and the State of Utah, in which the administration told BLM to turn its back not only on the 2.6 million acres in Utah that the agency itself knew to be wilderness quality, but on millions of additional citizens'-proposed lands in Utah that were also wilderness caliber and millions more acres in other Western states. Since the no-more wilderness settlement, the Utah BLM has sold oil and gas leases on well over 125,000 acres of wilderness-quality lands. The Wilderness Society, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and others are challenging these leases, as well as the "no more wilderness" settlement, in court.

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The oil and gas industry believes that developing the lands proposed for wilderness in America's Redrock Wilderness Act will produce meaningful amounts of oil and gas. According to recent government figures, however, "technically recoverable" undiscovered natural gas and oil resources on lands within America's Redrock Wilderness Act amount to less than four weeks of natural gas and roughly four days of oil at current United States consumption levels. That figure would likely shrink by up to 80 percent if one were to consider only oil and gas that could be profitably recovered. ■

## Current Energy Development

**A**pproximately three-quarters of Utah's BLM lands are currently available for oil and gas leasing. Like most Western states, Utah has a surplus of BLM lands that have been leased for oil and gas development but are not in production, as well as a surplus of applications for permit to drill. As of the end of fiscal year 2004, the oil and gas industry held more than 3 million acres of oil and gas leases on BLM lands in Utah but had put less than 1 million acres of those leased lands into production. Between 2001 and August 2006, the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining approved 6,289 permits from industry to drill new oil and gas wells in Utah. As of August 2006, there were 2,635 approved drill permits from that five-and-a-half year period that had not yet been drilled.

Fortunately, in August 2006, a federal district court ruling gave new hope to those who want to see Utah's

redrock wilderness protected from oil and gas drilling. By ruling that the BLM violated federal environmental laws when it rushed ahead and sold oil and gas leases on 16 parcels of wilderness-quality lands in Utah in 2003, the court unequivocally told BLM that it was illegal to sell off public lands for oil and gas development without first considering the impacts that development would have on wilderness values.

"Utah's wilderness-quality lands are public treasures of immeasurable historical and natural significance, but BLM, under orders from the Bush administration, is recklessly rushing headlong and allowing industry to develop these sensitive lands as fast as it can," says Stephen Bloch, a staff attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "BLM's approach to Utah's wildlands is shortsighted; these public lands are our nation's heritage and they have a higher value than to be used up and thrown away for resource extraction." ■

## Where is the Redrock Wilderness?



### Solution

**T**he Wilderness Society, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and their partners believe that lands formally proposed for protection as America's Redrock Wilderness should ultimately be designated by Congress as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. In the meantime – because there is no scarcity of highly productive and economically feasible areas where responsible oil and gas development can occur in Utah – the watersheds, wildlife habitat, and fragile beauty of the proposed-wilderness lands should be protected from oil and gas leasing and development. ■

### For More Information

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#### **TWS Research on Oil and Gas Issues:**

A wealth of research focused on oil and gas development in the West and Alaska is available on The Wilderness Society's website at <http://Wilderness.org/Library/OilAndGas.cfm>