

## **THE 2 SIDES ON WILDS DIFFER WIDELY BUT POLITELY**

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People who live and work in this sprawling, scenic county and people who come here to run its rivers or hike used to be worlds apart in the wilderness debate.

Now they're just one world apart - but it's roughly the size of Jupiter. At a public meeting Wednesday night in Castle Dale, those who support a large wilderness proposal and those who don't displayed extraordinary politeness and respect toward one another.

They even found some common ground: The scenic U.S. Bureau of Land Management holdings in Emery County deserve to be protected.

But they differed greatly in what "protect" means.

Wednesday's meeting - attended by about 150 people, many from the Wasatch Front - was one of several being held this month and next in rural Utah counties affected by various proposals to designate millions of acres of BLM land as federally protected wilderness.

Gov. Mike Leavitt has directed the counties to give him wilderness recommendations by April 1. Utah's congressional delegation then will draft a Utah wilderness bill and hold hearings in April and May, with the goal to introduce it in Congress by June 1.

Though Emery County commissioners on Wednesday tried to solicit specific recommendations from the public, they got an earful of the usual rhetoric about wilderness in general.

Dixie Thompson, a former Emery County commissioner and defeated congressional candidate, called wilderness advocates "elitists," while Dave Pacheco, of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, said the debate is not about "what's best for us. It's what's best for the planet."

Of the two dozen people who spoke Wednesday, about half were local residents generally opposed to wilderness who said the government can protect the lands without "locking them up."

The other half of the speakers were from the Wasatch Front and argued in favor of big wilderness areas.

"These lands belong to every single person in the United States, and I believe it is our obligation to set them aside for future generations," said Gail Hoskisson, a Carbon County native who now lives in Salt Lake City. She said knowing that wilderness exists in southern Utah is what sustains her.

But Emery County residents, as others in southern Utah, say designating federal land as wilderness would cripple the economic future of the county's 10,000-plus residents, most of whom are young and will be needing jobs soon.

"Put aside the politics of federal wilderness," said county resident Wes Curtis, "and join with us for ways to protect our federal lands without endangering our future economy."

The wilderness debate in Emery County is perhaps the biggest and most complex in the state because of the size of the proposals and the areas involved.

Emery County - which contains the magnificent San Rafael Swell as well as the western half of the Green River's Desolation Canyon - is about 2.8 million acres. The largest wilderness proposal calls for 848,000 acres - 30 percent of the county - to be preserved. That proposal, however, is not under serious consideration by the county.

Being considered is a compromising effort that has been under way for more than a year with the help of Project 2000, a non-profit group dedicated to Utah's future.

Though that effort has been boycotted by the Utah Wilderness Coalition, which represents three dozen national and local environmental groups and is pushing for the big wilderness proposal, it has been supported by the Utah Wilderness Association, a small but politically savvy group.

The UWA, which once proposed a significant chunk of Emery County for wilderness, has been trying to negotiate a satisfactory compromise "from the ground up," said George Nickas, association assistant coordinator.

So far, no consensus has been reached, and the April 1 deadline is approaching quickly.

County Commission Chairman Kent Petersen says the county is leaning toward supporting the BLM's proposal for wilderness, or possibly less.

To that, Nickas smiles wryly and responds, "That's what negotiations are for. . . . We'll have to see."

Emery County's next public meeting has been scheduled for Wednesday, March 22. Petersen said he hopes specific proposals will be ready for discussion at that meeting.