

SPRINGDALE SUPPORTS PLAN FOR 5.7 MILLION ACRES OF WILDS

Brent Israelsen

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The Springdale mayor and City Council have unanimously endorsed the Utah Wilderness Coalition's proposal to set aside 5.7 million acres of public lands as wilderness.

Springdale City Councilman Eric Bonner announced the endorsement Tuesday night during a Washington County Commission meeting on wilderness. The city, which sits at the doorstep of Zion National Park, becomes the first municipality in Utah to officially endorse a large wilderness proposal.

"Springdale is entirely dependent on the tourist trade," Bonner said. "The tourists come here for two major reasons: the beautiful scenery and the emptiness." Open space, such as wilderness, is a valuable economic asset whose value will increase with time, he said.

But Ron Thompson, manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District, warned that wilderness areas could hamper cities' ability to develop water resources desperately needed for keeping up with the county's growth.

Bonner and Thompson were among three dozen people to speak at the special meeting, which is part of the County Commission's effort to comply with Gov. Mike Leavitt's plan to resolve the decadelong debate over how much U.S. Bureau of Land Management land should be designated wilderness.

Leavitt has asked each county affected by wilderness proposals to give him a defensible recommendation by April 1. Utah's congressional delegation has agreed to draft a bill, hold regional hearings in Utah and introduce the bill in Congress by June 1.

Most of the commissions have been holding meetings to gather public input.

At the Washington County meeting, which was attended by more than 100 people, wilderness supporters appeared to outnumber opponents 2-1.

Supporters argued not only for a large wilderness bill but against the governor's plan, which they say does not allow enough time for a thoughtful process.

"The governor is shoving this down our throat," said lifelong St. George resident Phil Motter.

Pro-wilderness voices also spoke out against the governor's and delegation's plan to use "hard-release language" in the bill - language that would release all non-wilderness lands to development.

"Hard release is a slap in the face to our children and grandchildren," said St. George resident Jack McClellan.

Though the County Commission during the introduction of the meeting described only the BLM's wilderness proposal, most wilderness supporters spoke in favor of the Utah Wilderness Coalition's proposal, which is in the form of House Resolution 1500, sponsored by Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y.

In contrast to the BLM's own recommendation, which would designate 67,000 acres of federal land in Washington County as wilderness, HR1500 would designate 180,000 acres. (Please see box.)

Despite Springdale's endorsement of HR1500, mayors from seven Washington County towns have recommended that only about 52,000 acres in the county be designated wilderness. The mayors want areas excluded such as Cottonwood Canyon, which they say has a lot of potential for water development.

But those who favor big wilderness downplay the impact wilderness would have on water resources and say Washington County needs to start using less water anyway.

“Work on water conservation rather than searching for bigger and more water projects,” said Springdale resident Darla Sidles. “We can't always force the desert to fit our ways.”

A handful of wilderness detractors said the federal designation is unnecessary because the lands, by their very nature, will remain wild.

Dan Gubler, a lifelong Hurricane resident, opposes wilderness because of its restrictions.

“Limiting access is a big negative. It's wrong,” Gubler said.

The County Commission plans to hold another public meeting March 14, with written comments accepted until March 20.