

UTAH'S WILDERNESS BILL

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The long-awaited Utah wilderness bill finally emerged Tuesday from its five-month formulation process, and most Utahns would just as soon wait a while longer for a different one. The bill, which caps a 15-year debate, is a disappointment.

Utah's congressional delegation, in concert with Gov. Mike Leavitt, has produced the "Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995," designating 1.8 million acres of federal Bureau of Land Management land in Utah as wilderness. The total is about 200,000 acres fewer than the BLM's recommendation and 1.4 million acres fewer than the BLM wilderness study areas (WSAs) that have been managed as de facto wilderness for the past decade.

In choosing to designate only about 56 percent of the current WSAs -- and ignoring a compromise proposal offered by the Utah Wilderness Association of 3 million acres that would have covered most of the WSAs -- the delegation has simply not offered enough protection for Utah's wild lands. The congressional plan does cover about three-quarters of the UWA's proposed wilderness areas, but not with comparable acreage totals.

More protection may be forthcoming. Rep. Enid Waldholtz, a co-sponsor of the House bill with Rep. Jim Hansen, will argue in committee hearings for including as much as 300,000 more acres in the bill. She feels that some designated areas like the Book Cliffs need greater acreage numbers and some undesignated areas like Turtle Canyon deserve to be covered.

Also, Rep. Bill Orton, who differs with his colleagues, intends to offer his own bill that includes a combination of wilderness areas and national conservation areas (NCAs). So, perhaps through the efforts of Reps. Waldholtz and Orton, the amount of protected Utah lands will increase by the time Congress resolves the issue. But the acreage number is not the bill's only problem.

The delegation, recognizing that it could not hamstring future legislatures, dropped the concept of "hard release" that would place undesignated lands off-limits to future wilderness classification. But the release language in the bill is troublesome just the same, in that it does not release the undesignated WSAs to the BLM for the agency to manage as it finds appropriate.

The bill states that undesignated WSAs -- indeed, any BLM land not designated wilderness -- "shall not be managed for the purpose of protecting . . . their wilderness character and shall remain available for nonwilderness multiple uses . . ." So the BLM would seem to be prevented from managing some of its lands in a fitting manner.

Also, the bill includes several disclaimers that qualify some of the designated areas. More than 350,000 acres of the designated wilderness have been given an asterisk to allow either the "establishment" of water projects and transmission lines or the "expansion" of communication facilities. In other words, areas like Parunuweap Canyon and Fifty-Mile Mountain are wilderness areas, but not exactly.

This wilderness bill needs some tightening in these areas and some expanding in acreage numbers. Certainly, the delegation devoted much time and effort to crafting this legislation, but without producing a package protective enough of Utah's precious wild lands.