

SPECTACULAR PHOTOS BELIE LIVELY DISCOURSE IN WILDS DEBATE

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Each photograph is stunning.

One shows the golden sunlight on the mesa rim in eastern Utah's Book Cliffs region, which some say has the richest wildlife habitat in the Lower 48. In another, the rock monument nicknamed Jacob's Chair is the majestic geologic feature of Gravel Canyon in southeastern Utah's Cedar Mesa.

Next is the lurid sky above Hammond Canyon northwest of Blanding. Here, the lows meet highs at the southern edge of the Abajo Mountains, frustrated volcanic formations where an ancient magma chamber has butted its way through sandstone layers toward the sun.

In the last image is the burnt, crimson giant that is Red Canyon, where Wingate Sandstone formed cliffs and mesas long ago that are now home to Glen Canyon's population of bighorn sheep.

These are the wild lands.

And the spectacular photographs belie a lively political discourse about how much of Utah should remain in its natural, pristine state.

Two weeks after its announcement that an exhaustive citizens' reinventory of Utah found 8.5 million acres that could be designated as "wilderness," the Utah Wilderness Coalition is evaluating where to go next.

A book will be published soon with maps and explanations about the proposal that is 2.8 million acres more than the coalition's last proposal of 5.7 million.

The coalition has held four open houses in Utah and plans a series of meetings throughout the country.

There are hints about congressional support for legislation advocating the beefier proposal, but much of the work will be done in consensus-building meetings with various groups that have ties to Utah's lands.

These include environmental and wilderness proponents, Gov. Mike Leavitt, state and federal lands officials and members of the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration, which manages 3.7 million acres statewide for the benefit of Utah schoolchildren.

"We haven't talked to them. We haven't seen the maps. We don't know the details," said David Terry, director of the school trust lands administration.

But there is a new tone of cooperation among all groups, and a conciliatory precedent was set recently with the historic land swap that trades 376,000 school trust land acres trapped within national parks, monuments and forests for acres outside of federal protections.

"We reached a fairly solid consensus on the land trade," said Lawson LeGate, of the local Sierra Club. "I would like to believe that set some kind of standard for how to get together amicably and set some kinds of goals."

The areas in the photographs, shown Wednesday at a meeting with Deseret News editorial board, could affect 900,000 acres of school trust lands, which poses a problem for trust land officials who want to make money off the land.

"We are concerned, but we think that everything will be flushed out in the process," Terry said.

Tom Price, of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance agrees. "All parties are deeply involved.

This is certainly one of those meetings we will have."

School trust lands are scattered throughout the state, mostly in small parcels. The agency's goal is to make money off the land in a variety of ways, depending on the location. Land uses can include mining and mineral leases, grazing fees, development and land sales.

"How do you get the land to fund books, paper, pencils and teacher salaries?" Terry asks. "We can't rely on traditional economic uses for the land if it is set aside for wilderness."

The agency - which is considered quasi-public but operates like a business - isn't yet paying for student textbooks. After several years of lackluster management, the agency collects the money it generates off 3.7 million acres statewide.

It is held in a permanent fund that has grown to a record \$200 million with aggressive management in recent years.

"We don't intend to be an impediment to wilderness but, at some point, we have to say, 'How are we going to pay for this?'" said Dave Hebertson, spokesman for the school and institutional trust lands.

And the position of the Utah Wilderness Coalition is simple. "We are the Utah Wilderness Coalition, and our mission is to tell people what's wild," LeGate said. "If we don't do that, who is going to?"

But because of their scattered nature, it is unrealistic for wilderness advocates to seek out areas that wouldn't impact trust land acres. They are everywhere.

There are possibilities. Land could be "purchased" through private donations. That money could go into the trust lands permanent school fund, so the effort toward school funding is met, but the school trust lands administration would manage the land as wilderness, Terry said.