

Bill May Be Reintroduced to Mark 5.7 Million Utah Acres as Wilderness

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In what probably will prove to be another exercise in futility, a New York congressman plans to re-introduce legislation to set aside 5.7 million acres of wilderness in Utah.

Democrat Rep. Maurice Hinchey last week mailed a "Dear Colleague" letter asking fellow House members to co-sponsor House Resolution 1500, to be called "America's Red Rock Wilderness Act."

Supported by environmentalists and reviled by most Utah politicians, HR1500 calls for federal wilderness protection on 5.7 million acres administered in Utah by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Among those acres are 1.3 million within the boundaries of the new 1.7-million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, created in southern Utah by presidential fiat last fall.

The bill "flies in the face of rural Utah," said Met Johnson, director of the Western States Coalition, which primarily represents rural governments on public-lands issues.

While opposed to the new national monument, Utah leaders are hoping to persuade the government to continue to allow grazing and mining within its borders. Wilderness designation essentially would prohibit mining and could make grazing more difficult.

Johnson said he plans to rally his anti-wilderness troops to defeat HR1500, but they probably need to expend a minimal amount of energy: The bill has little chance of going anywhere.

Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, is head of the House National Parks and Public Lands Subcommittee, which is the bill's first obstacle. Hansen supports far less wilderness.

Hansen gave HR1500 a hearing during the last Congress, but it was defeated in favor of HR1745, a Utah-delegation-backed bill that called for 2.1 million acres of wilderness. That one later died on the House and Senate floors under threat of a Clinton veto.

Utah's delegation has yet to introduce a wilderness bill this Congress as they are waiting for Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, who has proposed an "incremental approach" to resolving the wilderness war: one area at a time.

Hansen "is willing to wait and see what comes out of the governor's process," said Alan Freemyer, staff director of the subcommittee. "Right now, it doesn't look like there's anything people can agree on."

Hinchey acknowledges that HR1500 -- which died in four previous Congresses dating back to the tenure of former Rep. Wayne Owens, D-Utah -- probably will face a fifth death this Congress.

"We are not expecting it to pass, but we do want to keep it on people's minds," said Hinchey aide Chris Arthur. "It is what we hope will be approved eventually."