

Opposition voiced to proposed U.S. wilds bill

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Proposed federal legislation that would designate new wilderness areas as well as sell off public lands in Washington County to finance private projects was opposed by many who attended a public hearing Thursday on the proposal.

"This legislation would create urban sprawl, consume tremendous amounts of water and destroy the landscape we've all grown to love," said Bill Corkle, who moved to Salt Lake City from Pennsylvania in 1989. "We all need our space."

The Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2006, sponsored by Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, and Rep. Jim Matheson, D- Utah, aims to sell up to 40 square miles of federal land with proceeds going toward construction of a water pipeline, new roads and other local projects.

The hearing at Westminster College was held in response to requests by environmentalists for more public comment on the draft, which was unveiled in St. George three months ago. The Utah Wilderness Coalition sponsored the hearing.

Glenn Rogers, chairman of the Shivwits band of the Piute Tribe, said the plan would overturn burial sites and displace sacred places on their reservation.

"Essentially, it would be giving them our land for free," he said. One of his main concerns is how dwindling law enforcement would be able to patrol the land.

The Gore Auditorium was filled to capacity with people standing in the aisle wanting to speak, while those who did speak mostly voiced concerns with overdevelopment and impact on the land.

Written comments were also gathered and will be sent to Bennett and Matheson.

"Everyone in Utah and Americans in general, have a stake in the future of our public lands," said Lawson LeGate, a Sierra Club field representative. He believes the proposal designates only a third of what should be protected wilderness.

Washington County officials have dismissed calls for additional public input as a tactical move by opponents who want to interfere in what local officials say is a county issue.

During the hearing in Salt Lake City, more than 200 off-road enthusiasts rallied at the Washington County administration building in St. George to urge elected officials and land managers to protect motorized access to public lands.

"Let's send a pro-public access message to those who make the decisions," said Dale Grange, president of the Tri State OHV Club in southern Utah. "Let them know where you stand. Let's keep public lands open. Over the years we've been compromising away too many areas that we want to go to, and we've been too apathetic in years past. We've got to take a stand."

Sponsors of the rally included Utah Shared Access Alliance or USA- ALL and the Blue Ribbon Coalition, both supporters of vehicle use for access and recreation on public lands.

Dustin Stanworth, representing USA-ALL, told the crowd that the organization's membership would no longer "tolerate apathy or dismissal of our concerns" by elected officials and others.

"Land managers and elected officials who fail to see the importance of motorized access to public lands had better wake up," Stanworth read from a prepared statement. "The radical environmentalists would have the public believe the scum of the earth use motorized vehicles on public lands. Well this assault from what we call the 'gang-greens' is nothing short of a war on motorized access. Their strategy is fear and propaganda."