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Faiths urge stewardship of Utah wild places

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Leaders of multiple faith groups announced a call for "wilderness stewardship" at a press conference Tuesday in front of the Federal Building in downtown Salt Lake City, urging others to join their efforts to recognize Utah's wilderness areas as places of deep spiritual meaning and worthy of protection.

"Faith and the Land" dialogues were held over the past year among 10 different community faiths, including Catholics, Methodists, Quakers and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

From those meetings, participants formulated an interfaith statement that was delivered to the offices of Sens. Orrin Hatch and Bob Bennett, both R-Utah, after Tuesday's speaking event.

Beyond the moral responsibility people have to be stewards of "wild places," wilderness in and of itself merits protection because it represents the sanctity of all things, said the Rev. Diana Johnson of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral. "The ancient Celts called it a 'thin place,' because these are places where heaven and earth come very close together."

The dialogues were coordinated by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and the group's grassroots outreach coordinator Deeda Seed said participants needed very little coaxing.

"This has not been a hard sell at all," she said. "I think there is a greater environmental awareness overall."

The talks over the last year focused on two questions that first sought to identify for participants how wild places matter spiritually and then how that particular faith inspires the caretaking of wilderness.

George Handley, an LDS Church member, said the result was the consensus that "our beliefs may be different, but our values are harmonious on this point."

The letter delivered to Bennett's office particularly praised him for co-authoring the Washington County Land Bill that created 256,338 acres of wilderness area, including enlarging Zion National Park.

Bennett was praised for his "vision and perseverance" in shepherding the legislation to successful passage last month.

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