

Noel, faith leaders stage impromptu wilderness debate

By Peggy Fletcher Stack

Rep. Mike Noel waded into a circle of interfaith advocates of wilderness protection in the Capitol Rotunda on Wednesday and almost immediately began defending his approach to "God's country" and his support of recreational vehicles in the outdoors.

"We've now created stacks of regulations," said the Kanab Republican, an outspoken critic of climate-change science and environmental activists. "Whatever you want to do on public lands, it is protested."

For more than 20 minutes, he engaged in a civil debate with leaders and members from 11 faiths -- Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Islamic, Jewish, Latter-day Saint, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Quaker, Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ -- who had gathered to showcase 250 images of Utah's beauty and ask their elected leaders to "recognize the spiritual importance of Utah's wild lands and support their preservation."

Designating wilderness will not "lock up" the land, insisted Stephen Trimble, a member of Utah's Jewish Reconstructionist congregation Chavurah B'Yachad.

Nearly three-fourths of the ground in America's Redrock Wilderness Act lies within one mile of roads. Grazing, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, hiking, rafting -- wilderness allows for them all, and wilderness legislation recognizes pre-existing property rights as well, Trimble said. The vast majority of Utah's significant energy reserves lie outside the boundaries of proposed wilderness. Tens of thousands of miles of off-road-vehicle routes remain accessible outside proposed wilderness.

"Our beliefs might differ," Brigham Young University humanities professor George Handley said, "but our values harmonize on this essential point: Wilderness teaches us humility, wonder, respect and gratitude for the creator."

Noel addressed many of his comments to Handley, whom he recognized as being a member of "his faith" (the LDS Church) and even addressed the BYU professor once as "brother."

The southern Utah rancher strenuously defended a protest ride by off-roaders through the Paria River bed, off-limits to such motorized use and a move Handley condemned as "desecration."

"Every winter this river has huge floods, wiping out everything in sight," Noel said. "Driving four-wheelers through the riverbed has no more impact than God does."

For his part, Handley said he wished legislators would use the language of "stewardship" when they discuss wilderness, rather than development.

"It would be healing," he said, "if we could hear that vocabulary."

Though she disagreed with Noel's perspective and conclusions, Elaine Emmi of Salt Lake Society of Friends (Quakers) said she applauded his willingness to engage on these crucial topics.

"That's what we want," Emmi said. "Dialogue is what we're after."