

Utah Legislature urged to see spiritual value of wilds

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SALT LAKE CITY — In the beginning God created the Earth, but now it is up to the Utah Legislature to protect it.

That's the message a group of faith-based wilderness activists brought to the Utah Capitol on Wednesday as they urged lawmakers to consider the spiritual importance of wilderness areas in the state.

Members of 11 different faith traditions called on lawmakers to recognize the spiritual value many people find in wild lands.

The Rev. Erin Gilmore of the Holladay United Church of Christ said lawmakers should enact "meaningful" protections for Utah lands.

"God isn't making any more wilderness," she said. "It is up to us to protect what remains."

The event featured handwritten notes from Utahns expressing their feelings about the state's natural beauty.

One anonymous writer observed, "Although I spend a lot of time in man-made places of worship, it is when I am alone and surrounded by God's magnificent and unadulterated creation that I am most at home in God's arms."

It is this sentiment organizers want lawmakers to understand as they make decisions about land use in Utah.

For Dede Carpenter from the Community of Grace Presbyterian Church, the importance of Utah voices in the debate cannot be overstated.

"There is a perception that all this support for wilderness comes from outside the state," she said. "That's not true. We're trying to show that there are many local people who care very deeply about this."

BYU humanities professor George Handley spoke about how an understanding of wilderness stewardship complements his membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

He said he believes in separating policy opinions from religious discussion, so he has not lobbied LDS leaders to take a stance. Still, Handley said he has tried to share how environmental stewardship fits with LDS ideals of provident living.

"Protecting wilderness is a way of showing self-restraint and respect for the creation and of honoring those places prophets have sought for communion with the Creator," he said. "Stewardship doesn't mean unbridled use."

After the event, Rep. Mike Noel, R-Kanab, discussed his views with members of the group.

Noel, who has proposed legislation calling global climate change a conspiracy, said wilderness proponents are wrong to assume that just because land is not designated wilderness, it will be destroyed.

Sugar House resident Jason Thornton said Noel's actions this legislative session are among the reasons why he decided to attend Wednesday's event.

"It's just preposterous," he said. "Much of the environmental legislation this year has just been childish. It's not healthy for the state."