

Utah Support for the Citizens' Proposal

Summary

Contrary to what Utah politicians and their industry allies would have us think, wilderness preservation is an issue very close to the hearts of Utah citizens. The citizens' wilderness proposal itself was researched and compiled by Utah residents and the majority of Utahns who testified at statewide wilderness hearings expressed enthusiastic support for comprehensive wilderness protection. A recent survey shows that most Utah residents favor designating all of Utah's remaining wild desert lands as official wilderness.

A Proposal Born and Raised in Utah

The citizens' proposal grew out of a desire among Utah residents to preserve what was left of the wild redrock canyon country. Based on thousands of hours of volunteer fieldwork, the proposal was originally published as *Wilderness at the Edge*—a citizen inventory of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness in Utah. Support for federal protection of these lands continued to grow and, in 1989, Utah Representative Wayne Owens introduced the citizens' proposal into Congress as America's Redrock Wilderness Act. Eligible lands recently documented in a second citizens' inventory have been added to the original bill and a companion bill has been introduced in the U.S. Senate.

The Wilderness Hearings

Governor Mike Leavitt and the Utah Congressional delegation orchestrated five regional hearings in 1995 to gauge public opinion on wilderness designation. In an effort to slant the outcome *against* wilderness, eighty percent of the hearings were held in rural Utah where only ten percent of the state's population resides. Nevertheless, pro-wilderness speakers outnumbered their opponents at every hearing, asking for full protection of Utah's remaining redrock wilderness. Of the more than 22,000 written opinions, spoken testimonies, and signed petitions received by the Utah governor's office during the hearings, over 70% supported the citizens' wilderness proposal.

The Poll Results

In a recent poll of 400 Utah residents conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide, the following opinions were revealed:

- Seven in ten Utah residents favor designating undeveloped BLM lands as wilderness.
- Six in ten residents say that wilderness designation makes a place more attractive to live in.
- A whopping nine in ten agree that wilderness is important to the state's economy.
- ***When informed that only 40% of the lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management remain in their natural state, nearly three-fourths of Utah residents favor designating all these lands as wilderness areas (close to half strongly favor doing so).***

This Land is *Our* Land

All lands recommended for wilderness designation under the citizens' proposal are federally managed public lands. As such, they are collectively owned by every tax-paying citizen of the United States—regardless of locale—and each one of us holds a stake in their future. America's redrock wilderness should be managed consistent with national public interest, rather than solely in the interest of local politicians and commercial developers who seek to exploit the land for short-term profit.