

FINAL PLAN FOR MOAB PUTS WILDERNESS LAST

MILLIONS OF ACRES WOULD BE SACRIFICED TO OFF-ROAD VEHICLES

The Bush administration will leave office in January 2009, but it is working hard to cement its anti-wilderness, pro-industry agenda on the public lands for decades to come. In Utah, for example, approximately 11 million acres of scenic public lands—icons of the American West—will be governed by land use plans currently being finalized by the Bush administration. For the past seven years—from the Cheney Energy Plan of 2001, to the administration’s rejection of its authority to identify and protect previously overlooked wilderness areas, to its ongoing failure to protect public lands from an explosion of off-road vehicle damage—exploitation, not balance, has been the hallmark of this administration. New land use plans will extend these misplaced priorities long after the Bush administration is gone.

The Bureau of Land Management recently released its final Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the 1.8 million-acre, world-renowned Moab area on August 1, 2008, and it bears out the worst fears of those seeking protection, rather than exploitation, of this remarkable area. In this wondrous place, home to Arches National Park, spectacular still water stretches of the Green River first explored by John Wesley Powell in the 1860s, breathtaking overlooks into Canyonlands National Park where views extend hundreds of miles in all directions, the BLM plan would slash proposed wilderness areas and adopt an off-road vehicle trail plan with thousands of miles of route in areas the agency concluded in its 1999 study had wilderness character, i.e., were essentially “roadless.”



Labyrinth Canyon proposed wilderness. © Ray Bloxham/SUWA

The flaws in the proposed plan would profoundly impact the future of this magnificent area, and reflect the administration’s single-minded focus on roads and development:

- The BLM is required by law to maintain the pristine character of the “wilderness study areas” (WSAs) the BLM identified in the early 1980s. But the BLM refuses to protect the breathtaking scenery that lies just outside these relatively limited WSAs. Of the 464,777 acres of non-WSA lands that qualify as wilderness, which are in America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act, the BLM proposes to protect just 47,761 acres, or 10 percent.
- Inexplicably, the BLM ceases to recognize 82 percent of the lands the agency, itself, determined to have wilderness character in its own recent reviews. Lost to development are Labyrinth Canyon, Dome Plateau next to Arches National Park, Goldbar Rim, Hatch Canyon, Hideout Canyon, Mexico Point, and large portions of Fisher Towers.
- Under the new proposed plan, wilderness landscapes will, in large part, become sacrifice zones for off-road vehicles (ORVs). A vast, redundant network of old mining routes and unplanned user created paths will be forever cemented into the landscape. This giveaway to the whims of off-road recreation interests at the expense of quiet users the BLM has the temerity to call “travel planning.”

BLM proposes to designate nearly 4,000 miles of ORV routes, many on lands within America's Red Rock Wilderness Act and which BLM previously said had wilderness character, i.e. , were "roadless." Damage from ORV use will be widespread, and peace and quiet will be extremely difficult to find as BLM's proposal will result in 84 percent of public lands near Moab (those south of I-70 which attract most of the area's visitors) being within 1/2 mile of a designated ORV route.

At the same time, BLM has done no site-specific studies to determine the impact of these routes on Native American cultural sites or other natural resources like riparian areas or wildlife habitat. The science and environmental assessment to support the ORV route designations does not exist.

- More than half of the rivers eligible for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act would not receive protection under the plan.

- Federal law requires the BLM to give priority to the protection of lands which qualify as "Areas of Critical Environmental Concern" because of scenic, cultural or ecological importance. However, the Moab BLM plan would fail to protect 90 percent of the 613,077 acres which qualify for ACEC designation.

- The plan fails to protect world-renowned scenic places from oil and gas development such as areas surrounding Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, Fisher Towers, Goldbar Rim and Labyrinth Canyon. In many other states, these areas would be protected as natural wonders; here the BLM would turn them into oil fields.



Goldbar proposed wilderness. © Ray Bloxham/SUWA



Above: Tenmile Canyon in the Labyrinth Canyon proposed wilderness. Right: Prehistoric rock art. © Liz Thomas/SUWA



In addition to the BLM's disregard for science-based management or a balanced approach which preserves sensitive and scenic landscapes, the BLM is making it as onerous as possible for the public to participate in this and other land use plans.

While the BLM has taken the better part of seven years to prepare the six plans for southern and eastern Utah's public lands, it plans to get these plans signed, sealed and enacted before the end of the Bush Administration's tenure. This strategy of releasing six plans within days of each other undermines the ability to scrutinize and adequately protest these bad plans. The Moab plan has many flaws, but perhaps the most egregious is the destructive and redundant web of off-road vehicle routes, with the accompanying noise, fumes, and scars. The Moab BLM should revise the plan in order to provide opportunities for traditional non-motorized use and to protect ecological havens for the long-term health of the land, the wildlife, water and other natural and cultural resources.

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