

UTAH PUBLIC LANDS CYNICISM

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Fresh off a two-decade effort to eviscerate the national monuments on Utah's public lands, the state's Republican lawmakers [are engaging in a deeply cynical attempt to create a few small protected spaces in order to develop the resources on everything else.](#)

A new land bill introduced in Congress Wednesday seeks to set aside more than a half-million acres of wilderness in Utah's Emery County.

Backed by Utah Rep. John Curtis and Sen. Orrin Hatch, the Emery County Public Land Management Act would also create a 4-square-mile national monument at the Cleveland-Lloyd Dinosaur Quarry and national conservation areas totaling 383,380 acres, mostly around the iconic San Rafael Swell.

Proponents lauded the bill, nearly 20 years in the making, as a locally driven solution to long-standing land-use conflicts, bringing "desired certainty to a broad range of stakeholders."

Some conservation groups, meanwhile, have denounced it, with one calling the bill a "big step backwards."

The measure's Utah sponsors contend it balances outdoor recreation, extractive industries and conservation of extraordinary sandstone landscapes and paleontological resources. Curtis, a Republican whose district includes the scenic part of central Utah, called it "a win for everybody."

"It balances the needs of funding for Utah's schools and conserving some of our nation's most pristine land and resources," Curtis said. "I am excited to champion this bill that helps add new resources and economic development opportunities to Emery County, and brings together conservation organizations, motorized and nonmotorized recreation, sportsmen, local officials and governments, the state of Utah, the congressional delegation, and many others."

This might sound good to the untutored on the history of public lands, but what this does is provide a small modicum of protection to bits of land that also allows a lot of destructive activities to take place and preempts a return to the federal public land policies that created such wonderful national monuments in Utah. There's a reason environmentalists are so disgusted:

"The same politicians who instigated and celebrated the illegal repeal of Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears national monuments are now trying to claim that their San Rafael bill is a 'conservation bill,'" said Scott Groene, executive director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, or SUWA. *"In fact, Hatch's bill represents a big step backwards for wilderness, emphasizing motorized recreation over conservation and leaving more than 900,000 acres of wilderness-quality lands without protection."*

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According to the Sierra Club, however, the bill's wording on the national conservation area is riddled with anti-conservation language.

"This bill fails to provide even the bare minimum of protection necessary for this world-class wilderness area," said the club's Utah director, Ashley Soltysiak.

"Rather," said Soltysiak, "it promotes development opportunities that will degrade and devalue these spectacular landscapes, under the guise of a conservation bill. As the rollbacks and concerted attacks on our public lands continue, this bill is simply another attempt to shortchange Utah's public lands and sacrifice our wild spaces."