

## A History of the Citizens' Proposal for Utah Wilderness

### Summary

In Utah's rugged canyon country lie some of the largest remaining roadless lands in the contiguous United States. Unfortunately, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) originally recommended only a small fraction of these spectacular public lands for federal wilderness designation. Taking the matter into their own hands, citizen volunteers walked the land themselves and documented nearly six million acres of pristine backcountry worthy of wilderness protection. A second and more extensive citizens' inventory completed in 1998 brought the total eligible acreage to about nine million. The results of this exhaustive and unprecedented effort have been compiled in a formal citizens' proposal, and in two bills now pending before the U.S. Congress.

### The BLM Inventory

Following up on the 1964 Wilderness Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 directed the BLM to inventory all roadless areas in the United States and assess their potential for wilderness designation. Suitable lands identified as Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) would be managed as wilderness until Congress made a final decision. But in Utah, the process was deeply flawed: when completed in 1980, the BLM inventory produced what amounted to a commercial and industrial zoning plan. Huge tracts were "inventoried" by helicopter without adequate field work and many inventory decisions violated the BLM's own policies. Out of 23 million acres, the Utah BLM originally designated only 2.5 million acres as WSAs.

Outraged by the BLM's numerous and egregious violations of policy during the inventory process, Utah conservation groups filed a series of appeals with the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA). In 1983, the IBLA ruled that the Utah inventory was in error on 90% of the lands under appeal. In response, the BLM eventually increased the Utah WSA acreage to 3.2 million acres. These lands are currently being managed as de facto wilderness by the BLM until Congress decides their fate.

### Birth of the Utah Wilderness Coalition

In 1985, conservationists from 40 citizen groups formed the Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC) and began to develop an alternative to the BLM's proposal—a citizens' wilderness proposal. Over the course of the next several years, citizens spent thousands of hours in the field documenting wilderness characteristics and mapping boundaries of proposed wilderness areas. The results of their exhaustive fieldwork were published in *Wilderness at the Edge*, a 400-page proposal calling for federal protection of 5.7 million acres of wilderness-quality land in Utah. In 1989, Utah Rep. Wayne Owens first introduced the citizens' proposal into Congress as America's Redrock Wilderness Act. New York Rep. Maurice Hinchey assumed sponsorship of the bill in 1993 and Sen. Richard Durbin of Illinois first introduced a corresponding bill into the U.S. Senate in 1997.

The UWC recently conducted a reinventory of BLM wilderness in Utah to update and strengthen the citizens' proposal. With more time and resources at their disposal the second time around, conservationists identified an additional 3.4 million acres of wilderness-quality lands and added them to the proposal. Rep. Hinchey and Sen. Durbin reintroduced the improved and expanded bill into Congress in 1999.