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Group pushes more Utah wilderness to ease dust on snow

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A Utah wilderness group is pitching a proposal that would expand federally designated wilderness in southeastern Utah as a way to alleviate the dust storms that often blanket Colorado mountains in the spring.

America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which has been proposed and debated in various forms for more than 20 years, would make 9.5 million acres of Bureau of Land Management Land in southern Utah federally designated wilderness. That means no roads, mineral extraction or off road vehicle use would be allowed in these areas, located on the Colorado Plateau and encompassing much of the land in between the national parks in Utah's red rock canyon country. The wilderness designation, while allowing rock climbing, would also ban the use of power drills that climbers often use to secure bolts into rock.

A portion of those lands in Utah's San Juan County are expected to be proposed for designation in a package that is on its way to congress via Sen. Bob Bennett, a Utah Republican. Meetings to gather feedback on the proposed designations for BLM lands south of Moab begin next week in Utah.

"This really is a pivotal moment," said Terri Martin, the western regional organizer with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. Martin and a colleague were in Aspen this week holding informational sessions on the proposal and the effect of wilderness designation on the dust-on-snow phenomenon.

Dust from the Colorado Plateau (essentially the Four Corners region of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona) is often picked up by prevailing winds in the spring and deposited on the slopes of Colorado mountains. This unsightly reddish-brown layer causes snow to melt faster and has consequences for the summer water supply and the mountain ecosystem.

SUWA contends designating the Utah lands as wilderness, thereby banning oil and gas development and restricting off road vehicle use, would ease the dust problem.

"What happens on these lands will either mitigate or exacerbate the dust on snow problem," Martin said.

A 2007 study published in the journal Nature Geoscience found that dust deposits in high alpine lakes in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado have increased five-fold in the last 150 years compared to the 5,000 year average.

Researchers have also found that in the dusty years of 2004 and 2009, snowpack in the San Juans absorbed at least twice as much energy from the sun and melted off between 18 and 45 days sooner than average.

Human activities such as cattle grazing, road building, off-road vehicle use and oil and gas extraction disturb and destabilize desert soils, accounting for the increase in dust in the modern era, according to SUWA.

While grazing is still allowed on federally designated wilderness lands, stopping oil and gas development and restricting off road vehicle use would be a step in the right direction, Martin said.

SUWA sees Bennett's efforts as a major victory and a long time coming, Martin said. Wilderness advocates have been urging the BLM for decades to recognize — and manage — more of its red rock lands as wilderness. Martin also said that a recent poll found more than 60 percent of Utahns in favor of more red rock wilderness designation.

“My read is that our delegation is realizing, although they have not been big wilderness advocates in the past, that there are deserving lands out there,” Martin said.

Bennett is also sticking to Utah politicians' traditional way of going about wilderness designation by going through the county governments first, Martin said. This has often been a dead end because local politics in Utah's red rock country often have favored agricultural, industrial and recreational concerns over environmental.

The San Juan County designation could be included in next fall's congressional omnibus bill, a quick timeline which Martin said makes SUWA a little uncomfortable. The group would rather see more time taken to make sure the process is done right, Martin said. She also wants to make sure that all voices, including those of Coloradans who frequent red rock country and are also impacted by the dust, are heard.

Martin and colleague David Garbett were at Aspen City Council on Monday asking council to endorse more wilderness in southern Utah.

Mayor Mick Ireland was receptive to the idea.

“The idea of Utah senators supporting wilderness is so intriguing,” he said.

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A cut into the snowpack at Snowmass reveals the red dust from the Colorado Plateau that is picked up by prevailing winds in the spring and deposited on the slopes of Colorado mountains. This unsightly reddish-brown layer causes snow to melt faster and has consequences for the summer water supply and the mountain ecosystem.

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