

TELLURIDE DAILY PLANET

Group pushes for more wilderness designation

Legislation could decrease Colorado dust

By Kathrine Warren
Staff Reporter

Published: Wednesday, May 19, 2010 12:27 PM CDT

In recent springs, windstorms have swept red dust off the Colorado Plateau, leaving a distinct red tint on the San Juan Mountains' snowpack as they travel through.

Not only is it a nuisance to spring skiers who compare skiing on dust-covered snow to skiing on gum, but it is also a cause for concern for area scientists.

Dust deposited on Colorado's mountains have shortened seasonal snow cover by 18 to 35 days, according to data provided by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and last year snow melted 48 days earlier than in previous years.

"Mountains have always served as Colorado's water tank," said Terri Martin, western regional organizer for SUWA in a presentation in Durango on Monday. Dust increases snow's energy absorption, which leads to increased snowmelt.

"Windstorms are natural, but the amount of dust in the air is not," Martin said. Data shows that the biggest increase in dust in Colorado started 150 years ago, the same time that white settlers started moving to Southern Utah and using the land for ranching or recreation.

The SUWA hopes a piece of legislation, America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, can play a role in reducing the amount of dust that gets disturbed and brought to the San Juans.

The act, supported by 163 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives and 22 co-sponsors in the U.S. Senate, would designate roughly 9 million acres of Bureau of Land Management public land in Utah by admitting the land to the National Wilderness Preservation System. The proposed public lands include Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and BLM lands that are currently considered "wilderness-study areas" near Zion, Canyonlands and Arches national parks.

The new designation could reduce the use of off-road vehicles by closing access to certain roads, protect more archaeology sites and prohibit new oil and gas leases on these public lands.

“This is truly a pivotal moment for the future of the Utah wilderness,” she said.

According to Martin, the basic principle of the legislation is “do what we can do to protect what remains.”

“Desert soil is resilient to wind erosion if it hasn’t been disturbed,” she said. “Once it’s disturbed, it’s very vulnerable. “

Martin was quick to point out that wilderness designation isn’t the full solution to Colorado’s dust storm problem, but it’s a step in the right direction.

“It’s the kind of problem that can’t fully be solved,” she said. “We’ve got to piece together the solutions, and each piece begins to count.

“Wilderness designation can help prevent surface disturbances,” Martin said. “One step towards mitigating the amount of dust on Colorado’s snow is to look at the BLM’s management of public lands.”

Colorado Senator Mark Udall sits on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which is key to the legislation’s passage. Martin encouraged all Coloradoans who are concerned about the dust or the protection of Utah’s public lands to write Udall (and other members of Congress) and voice their support of America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act.

Ronnie Egan, director of Great Old Broads for Wilderness, said that congressional leaders are hearing daily from oil and gas companies, the ranching industry and off-road vehicle manufacturers in opposition of the legislation.

“Our only weapon is writing letters [to our leaders],” Egan said.

“Udall knows these lands better than anyone else in Congress,” Martin said. “He has a family legacy of protecting the Colorado Plateau. It’s in his legacy to play his part.”