

Utah's Mormon Republican establishment is backing Trump's assault on public lands

By



Bears Ears National Monument. (Los Angeles Times)

Nearly [two-thirds](#) of Utah is public land, including the densest array of national parks, monuments, forests and wilderness in the lower 48 states. Federal agencies manage this vast maze of red rock canyons on behalf of all Americans. But the state's elected officials seem to believe all this public land is *their* land.

The best use of every acre, in the minds of Utah's governor and congressional delegation, is profit. Utah's political elite appears to believe in market capitalism above all else. Where many see wildness and refuge in remote and delicate desert country, they see potential mines, wells and pipelines.

This much is well known. Less appreciated is the impact that Mormon culture and history exert on every Utah debate about public lands, the climate crisis and fossil fuel extraction.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints guides the views and values of its members, who comprise nearly [two-thirds](#) of the state's citizens. Rural residents, especially, cherish their origin story, which begins well before Mormon settlers began their hardscrabble pioneering in the red rock wilderness.

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Mormons fault the United States for failing to protect them during the so-called Mormon Wars of the 19th century, when the governor of Missouri expelled them from the state; an Illinois mob murdered their prophet, Joseph Smith; and the U.S. Army came to the Utah territory to confront Mormon settlers there. This shared saga of trauma and escape underpins a deep distrust of the federal government in Mormon culture.

The mindset meshes perfectly with the anti-regulation libertarianism adopted by Utah's Republican establishment. Utah politicians speak of liberty and freedom, but their fixation on shielding property rights from the reach of government weakens everything public — the public domain, the public trust, the public commons. In southern Utah counties, conservative politicians and a new generation of Sagebrush Rebels drown out any calmer voices within Mormon communities that might advocate for land stewardship and restraint. Fox News and conservative talk radio amplify the drumbeat.

The Trump administration's drive to hand over public lands to the fossil fuel industry is finding plenty of sympathetic souls in Utah. The attacks began in 2017, when President Trump [eviscerated](#) Utah's two large-scale national monuments, Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears. In a cynical effort to make the president's executive order permanent before the courts respond, Republican U.S. Reps. Chris Stewart and John Curtis followed up with [two deeply flawed bills](#).

The assault continues. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has [scrapped](#) Obama-era master plans for public lands surrounding Utah's national parks in favor of ramped-up oil and gas leases. The Bureau of Land Management has also rushed to approve [plans that open up](#) the formerly protected Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears to mining, off-road vehicles and privatization. It's impossible for citizens to adequately respond to each attack before another terrible idea is proposed. The latest arrived in May, when Curtis and Sen. Orrin Hatch introduced their [Emery County Public Land Management Act of 2018](#). The bill, drafted by the commissioners of a remote county with just [10,000 citizens](#), would create a new national monument and national conservation area. That *sounds* good, and such language allows the legislation's sponsors to brand it as a step forward for conservation in Utah red rock country. But their claims mislead.

If the Emery County bill is passed, [nearly 1 million acres](#) of land would lose consideration as wilderness, threatening the integrity of irreplaceable landscapes. In the San Rafael badlands, 12,000 years of Native American rock art and cultural heritage would receive no protection at all. No other bill currently before Congress would affect public lands on this scale — 1.5 million acres. And yet the Emery County commissioners wrote the bill with little input from voices outside the county.

The bill would put a significant amount of wilderness-quality land at risk and give local officials unprecedented authority over public land of national importance — two poison pills sure to rouse opposition nationally and from

Utahns who want the state's public lands protected. Citizens packed a [September hearing](#) in Salt Lake City and addressed two empty chairs in lieu of Curtis and Hatch, who did not attend.

Curtis and Hatch feel little need to listen. The values of Mormon Republicans hold full sway in Utah. [Almost 90%](#) of Utah's state legislature is Mormon, and 83% of its members are Republican. Its congressional delegation is 100% Republican [and Mormon](#). With this closed circle, county officials know they can be brazen in their radical proposals for development on public lands.

But these land-use decisions should matter to all Americans. They will have a profound effect on our ability to stabilize the climate, respect Native nations and protect our cultural and paleontological heritage. Let your members of Congress know that you care about preserving the red rock canyonlands of Utah, no matter where you live.

Stephen Trimble is the author of several books, most recently "Red Rock Stories: Three Generations of Writers Speak on Behalf of Utah's Public Lands." He serves on the board of the nonprofit [Grand Staircase Escalante Partners](#).