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Home > House lawmakers discuss Grand Staircase-Escalante during Natural Resources subcommittee hearing

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On December 6, in response to President Donald Trump's executive order shrinking the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument released two days prior, Representative Chris Stewart (R-UT-2) introduced new legislation aiming to provide greater conservation, recreation, economic development, and local management of the federal lands in his district. Representative Stewart's bill, the Grand Staircase Escalante Enhancement Act (H.R. 4558), would create Utah's sixth national park, the Escalante Canyons National Park and Preserve. The bill would prohibit mineral extraction within the new park and preserve – an area that is rich in energy and mineral resources, and contains invaluable cultural artifacts that are vulnerable to disruption from potential mining operations.

The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands held a legislative hearing on December 14 to consider the Grand Staircase Escalante Enhancement Act. Among the expert witnesses invited to provide testimony, Michael Leavitt, former governor of Utah, said he believes that there was insufficient consultation or warning prior to the original designation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by former President Bill Clinton in 1996. Mr. Leavitt suggested this action demonstrated an abuse of power and “a deliberate effort to conceal and keep monument planning out of public view.”

Other witnesses at the hearing expressed their support for the bill, which some expect will stimulate economic growth for nearby communities. Utah Office of Tourism Director Vicki Varela stated that the proposed designation of a sixth national park in Utah would generate prosperity in what is now considered to be an economically distressed region of the state. Susan Hand, co-owner and manager of the local Willow Canyon Outdoor Company, agreed that protected public lands can act as economic engines for local communities, but she added that the excised monument units and proposed national park included in this bill would not replace the loss of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument as a whole. Leland Polluck of the Garfield County Board of Commissioners explained that the bill will provide a better balance between federal management and local input, and establish a platform to allow for both the enjoyment and use of the land at present, as well as preserving its natural resources for future generations.

While the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument has drawn criticism since it was first established in 1996, it remains a frontier with countless opportunities for quiet recreation and solitude, according to the Bureau of Land Management. The monument area has spurred significant scientific discoveries, where fossil excavations have yielded more information about ecosystem change at the end of the dinosaur era than any other place in the world. Since its designation, 21 new species of dinosaurs have been discovered within the monument's boundaries.

Sources: Library of Congress, U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
