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CONTACT: Heidi McIntosh, SUWA * 801-486-3161
Gale Dick, Save Our Canyons * 801-359-5764
Leslie Jones, The Wilderness Society * 202-429-2628
Ted Zukoski, Earthjustice * 303-996-9622

UTAH, FEDS CONTINUE TO STONEWALL PUBLIC ON PHANTOM HIGHWAYS CONTROVERSY

**State, Bureau of Land Management Still Withholding Documents;
Conservation Groups Challenge BLM Denial**

The State of Utah and the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) continue to withhold documents from the public concerning their supposedly 'open process' for resolving claims to disputed dirt tracks across Utah, conservation groups charged today. The charge came as two of the groups – the Southern Utah Wilderness Society (SUWA) and The Wilderness Society – lodged a formal appeal last week with the Interior Department over a decision by BLM's Utah Office to withhold information concerning jeep tracks and cattle paths claimed as 'constructed highways' by Utah under the repealed, Civil War-era law known as R.S. 2477.

Meanwhile, the State of Utah and Salt Lake County last month refused to provide information about proposed highway claims in a critical Salt Lake watershed to local conservationists.

"The Bush Administration and the State continue to stonewall, to conduct the public's business behind closed doors," said Heidi McIntosh, conservation director for SUWA. "If these are really public highways, why keep the public in the dark? With the State and counties claiming barely visible hiking trails and all-terrain vehicle tracks through National Parks and Wilderness areas as 'highways,' the public has an even greater right to know."

SUWA and The Wilderness Society filed their appeal last week after the Utah office of BLM refused to provide information concerning claims being pushed by the State of Utah under an April agreement, and the standards that the BLM will use to approve or disapprove those claims. Earthjustice represents the groups in the appeal.

McIntosh noted that some impacts of turning nearly invisible trails over to the State as highways could include: the destruction of existing wilderness areas, disqualification of unprotected areas as wilderness, damage to wildlife habitat, destruction of riparian areas, harm to watersheds important for drinking water, and the elimination of beloved hunting and hiking

opportunities. She noted that the State has taken the position in federal court that the BLM can't protect wilderness study areas from off-road vehicle travel, because the State claims all-terrain vehicle trails are really 'constructed highways' under R.S. 2477.

Last year, The Wilderness Society and SUWA were forced to sue BLM and the State of Utah to obtain a map of Utah's claims to proposed highways across the State. As a result of the suit, BLM released Utah's map – which showed the State claiming 100,000 miles of highways, including every hiking trail in Zion National Park and numerous routes in the Wasatch Mountains.

In April, BLM and the State of Utah adopted an agreement to speed the surrender of supposed highways from the American public to the State. Both then-Gov. Mike Leavitt and Interior Secretary Gale Norton promised that the process for reviewing Utah's claims would be open to the public. But BLM continues to withhold documents, even in the face of Freedom of Information Act requests.

Similarly, the State of Utah of Utah has refused to provide documents under the state's open records laws to Salt Lake-based conservation group Citizens Committee to Save Our Canyons last month when the group sought information about a half-dozen highway claims on Forest Service lands in Big Cottonwood Canyon, a key watershed providing drinking water for Salt Lake City. Salt Lake County has also refused a similar request from Save Our Canyons, though the County did provide the information to a developer.

"Using bogus highway claims to turn Forest Service lands over to rampant off-road vehicle use would be a disaster for Salt Lake's drinking water supply, and for the scenic beauty and wildlife we enjoy here along the Wasatch Front," said Gale Dick, President of Save Our Canyons. "The State and Salt Lake County should stop skulking around in the shadows let the public in."

Conservation groups vowed to continue their push for open government. "Again and again the government is cutting deals—with terms generally favorable to industry groups and other special interests—and excluding the public from the process," said Leslie Jones, Deputy General Counsel for The Wilderness Society. "With all the talk of 'transparency' in government these days, this process is about as opaque as you can get."

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