

Friend or Foe?

My love for four-wheel driving started long before I ever thought about being involved in public-lands advocacy. When I was about twelve years old, I asked my grandfather if he would take me hunting on the hills of his farm in eastern Kentucky. Instead of going with me, he simply said, “You know where the keys are—go ahead and take the Jeep.”



Those hills were steep, rough, and unforgiving. If a road washed out it became impassable, there wasn't anyone to call for help. I learned quickly that if I wanted to get where I was going, I had to figure out how to build and maintain the roads ourselves. Through a lot of trial and error—and what we might politely call a little hillbilly engineering—I developed both a love of the outdoors and an appreciation for the importance of maintaining access to the places we enjoy.

Years later, after purchasing a Jeep dealership in Redlands, California, I reconnected with organized four-wheel recreation through the **Inland Empire 4 Wheel Drive Club**. I eventually served as President of the club and became deeply involved in land-use issues in the **San Bernardino National Forest**, where I first learned how fragile access to public lands can be if responsible users are not actively involved in protecting it.

When I relocated to Southern Utah in 2020, I quickly saw both the incredible opportunities for motorized recreation here and the growing challenges facing those who enjoy it. That experience led me to become actively involved with the **Utah Public Lands Alliance (UPLA)**, where I now serve as President. My goal is simple: to help ensure that responsible motorized recreation remains a valued and protected use of our public lands for future generations.

With the rise of social media and automated accounts that amplify opinions, it has become increasingly difficult to separate fact from fiction. This challenge affects nearly every part of modern life, and it is no less present in the ongoing fight to preserve motorized vehicle access on our public and private lands.

While predicting the future is always uncertain, examining past actions and outcomes can provide valuable insight into where we should place our trust moving forward. In this article, I'll look at the organizations, agencies, and leaders shaping public-lands policy in Utah and ask a simple question: **are they truly friends of responsible OHV recreation—or are they working against it?**

Foes of Motorized Access

In debates over public lands, there is no shortage of claims, accusations, and political rhetoric. Rather than relying on slogans, the best way to evaluate who truly supports motorized recreation is to look at actions. What organizations have actually done in the past is usually the clearest indicator of what they are likely to do in the future.

One of the most visible opponents of motorized access in Utah has been the **Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA)**. SUWA has been involved in many actions that have resulted in reduced OHV access, including the litigation that led to the **2017 settlement agreement with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)** requiring new travel management plans across large portions of Utah.

SUWA often works in coordination with other national environmental organizations, including **The Wilderness Society**. These groups frequently advocate for policies that significantly restrict motorized recreation on public lands.

Other organizations have played similar roles in different regions. For example, the **Center for Biological Diversity** has been very active in California, where the *WEMO (West Mojave)* litigation created precedents that could influence land-management decisions elsewhere in the West.

Closer to home, **Conserve Southwest Utah**, a St. George–based environmental nonprofit, is involved in regional planning issues that could influence transportation and access decisions across southern Utah.

These groups have become very effective in shaping public narratives through social media and advocacy campaigns. Their policy goals often prioritize conservation approaches that limit motorized recreation, and as such they remain some of the most significant opponents of OHV access. Their actions frequently require organized responses through public comment, advocacy, and in some cases litigation.

As a general rule, when these organizations advocate for any policies, OHV users should carefully examine the potential impacts and be prepared to advocate for balanced access. In many cases, their policy objectives conflict directly with continued OHV access. They are clear enemies to motorized OHV.

Federal and State Agencies: Friend, Foe, or Neutral?

When discussing “the administration,” many people immediately think of federal agencies such as the **BLM** and the **U.S. Forest Service**. These agencies certainly play major roles in

motorized travel management, but there are several other governmental entities that significantly influence public-lands policy in Utah.

Utah Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office (PLPCO)

One of the strongest allies for motorized access in Utah is the **Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office (PLPCO)**, led by Redge Johnson. PLPCO represents the State of Utah's interests in public-lands policy and often coordinates litigation and policy positions involving federal land-management agencies.

PLPCO has cataloged more than **12,500 RS-2477 roads totaling approximately 37,500 miles**, many of which are commonly used for OHV travel. These historic rights-of-way are central to ongoing legal disputes over access.

The office is currently involved in numerous lawsuits defending these routes, including the well-known **Kane County RS-2477 cases**, which may ultimately determine the legal status of many historic roads across Utah.

PLPCO has also supported efforts to protect public access in disputes involving private landowners and local governments—including the road access issues near **Virgin, Utah**.

Without PLPCO's involvement, the loss of motorized routes in Utah would likely have been far greater than it already has been. For these reasons, **PLPCO should clearly be considered a friend of motorized access.**

U.S. Forest Service

The **U.S. Forest Service**, operating under the Department of Agriculture, manages large areas of land used for motorized recreation. In Utah, the Forest Service has not been responsible for the same level of recent closures seen on BLM lands, though some proposals—particularly in the **Manti-La Sal National Forest**—have raised concerns about potential impacts to snowmobiling and other motorized recreation. Fortunately, the most recent forest plan revision that would have significantly affected access was halted.

The Forest Service will also play a major role in managing lands within the **Bears Ears and Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monuments** if current management plans move forward.

Because outcomes have varied and future policy direction remains uncertain, the Forest Service remains somewhere between **friend and foe**, depending on how future plans are made and implemented.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Over the past several years, the **BLM** has been responsible for some of the most significant losses of OHV routes in Utah. Much of this direction came from leadership in Washington, including former BLM Director **Nada Culver** and former Interior Secretary **Deb Haaland**.

Recent travel-management decisions resulted in substantial route closures, including:

- **317 miles** in the **Moab Labyrinth Rims** area
- **689 miles** in the **San Rafael Desert**
- **602 miles** in the **Henry Mountains**

In addition, policies such as the **BLM Landscape Health and Conservation Rule**, implementation of the **30x30 initiative**, and expanded interpretations of the **minimization criteria** have raised significant concerns among motorized-recreation advocates.

UPLA and BRC are working to pursue **national reform of the minimization criteria**, which many believe has been a major driver of route closures in travel management planning.

UPLA also recently got involved with a request from an event organizer that required every trail guide to be First Aid and CPR certified. Although safety is an important part of every event, requiring every volunteer guide to obtain and maintain certification would have been overly burdensome where most guides are volunteers. Working with the State BLM office, UPLA secured revisions to the BLM state guidelines that will give discretion to the local BLM Field Manager to establish a relevant policy for that event.

There are reasons for cautious optimism. Advocacy from UPLA and the **BlueRibbon Coalition (BRC)** has helped push for reconsideration of some policies. Interior Secretary **Doug Burgum** is currently evaluating revisions to the Landscape Health Rule, recent route closures in Moab (with some others to come), and burdensome federal regulations.

Potential Changes in BLM Leadership

Leadership at the Bureau of Land Management has a major influence on how these policies are implemented. Because of that, many are closely watching the nomination of former Congressman **Stevan Pearce** to serve as the next BLM Director. Extreme Conservation groups are claiming that the world as we know it will end if former Congressman is confirmed as Director of the Bureau of Land Management.

I watched the recent 2 hour Senate confirmation hearing where Pearce was questioned extensively by members of both parties. During the hearing he explained that his 2012 comments about disposing of public lands were largely the result of frustration with how federal agencies were (or were not) working with state and local governments in New Mexico, and did not represent his current desire to dispose of large tracts of public land. He

added that if Congress identified specific tracts of lands for disposal, he would consider those individually.

Pearce also made clear that the BLM does not have the authority to sell public lands except where Congress specifically authorizes it. He acknowledged that Congress occasionally directs isolated land transfers for specific public purposes, and stated that BLM would continue to follow those congressional directives.

Most importantly for recreationists, Pearce repeatedly emphasized his support for the **multiple-use mandate**, specifically noting recreation as one of the uses that must be balanced in federal land management.

It should be restated that UPLA is primarily concerned with impacts to OHV recreation, and that where land transfers are proposed that have limited or no adverse impacts to OHV, we would only state that and would not take a position of support or opposition.

While it will ultimately be his actions as Director that determine the outcome, his testimony suggests a stronger commitment to the multiple-use mandate than we have seen from recent BLM leadership. I can also affirm that there seemed no strong opposition from either party in the hearing for his confirmation, so his confirmation is very likely For OHV recreationists, that could represent a shift toward a more balanced approach to managing our public lands.

NEPA and Public Comment Changes

The **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** has undergone major changes in recent years. After court decisions determined that the **Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)** could no longer impose binding regulations on federal agencies, agencies such as the BLM and Forest Service issued their own rule revisions.

UPLA submitted extensive comments on these proposed rules. The final rules were published recently, and several modifications reflected concerns raised during the public comment process.

However, one particularly concerning change is the **reduction of required public comment opportunities**.

Under the new framework:

- **Environmental Impact Statements (EIS)** still require public comment opportunities during the **scoping stage**, but for a very short period.

- **Environmental Assessments (EAs) and Categorical Exclusions (CEs)** make up most of the decisions affecting OHV travel and there are no requirements for public comments at any stage of the process.

Historically, detailed route-specific comments have been one of the most effective tools for keeping routes open, and these are very difficult until a Draft EA is released. UPLA will continue working with agencies to emphasize the value of informed public participation and an opportunity for public comments.

UPLA also commented on the requirement that only comments deemed as “substantive” are considered, asking that this requirement be removed. Although they rejected that request, they did soften the position somewhat by stating “that agencies must prioritize comments that provide information relevant to the decision.” They also clarified that “all comments will be acknowledged, even if only substantive comments require response.”

UPLA will be strengthening the **TrailSaver reporting system** so that we can respond quickly with detailed information when comment opportunities arise.

National Park Service

UPLA has less involvement with the **National Park Service (NPS)** because most park lands have long-standing restrictions on motorized travel.

However, the BlueRibbon Coalition recently achieved an important victory regarding **filming permit rules**, which originally threatened to classify casual social-media videos as commercial filming requiring permits.

UPLA and BRC also supported congressional efforts to reopen the **Glen Canyon OHV route** through the **Congressional Review Act (CRA)**.

While the National Park Service is unlikely to become a major advocate for OHV access, it currently falls closer to a **neutral position** rather than an outright foe.

Utah DNR and State Parks

UPLA has built productive relationships with the **Utah Department of Natural Resources** and **Utah State Parks**.

We are fortunate to have **Wade Allinson**, Utah’s new OHV Program Manager, who has emphasized collaboration with user groups and is a very active OHV user. Notably, when he accepted the position, he made it clear that the role should focus on program management rather than law enforcement, and insisted that his office was in the field where OHV happens, not in Salt Lake City.

Utah's **OHV Grant Program** is widely considered one of the best in the country and has funded numerous projects supporting motorized recreation.

We are continuing to work with Utah State Parks in several areas, especially when it comes to events.

While there is always room for improvement, Utah's state agencies generally demonstrate a willingness to listen to stakeholders and consider user input. For that reason, they should be considered **friends of OHV recreation**.

The Presidency

Federal executive leadership also plays an important role in public-lands policy.

President **Donald Trump** previously supported several policies favorable to motorized recreation, including adjustments to national monument boundaries and directives encouraging expanded recreational access on federal lands.

Vice President **JD Vance** has also publicly recognized that activities such as riding ATVs and off-highway vehicles are important recreational traditions in many rural communities and should be considered legitimate uses of public lands.

While not every policy outcome has matched the hopes of OHV advocates, the administration's approach to multiple-use land management has generally been more supportive than previous policies.

Legislative Support for Motorized Access

Utah State Legislature

Utah's legislature has consistently been supportive of responsible OHV recreation.

UPLA benefits from the efforts of **Brett Stewart**, who volunteers as a legislative advocate and works closely with lawmakers to review proposed legislation and request changes where necessary.

A recent example is **HB 444**, sponsored by Representative **Troy Shelley**, which updated several OHV regulations. One change removed a requirement that safety flags be limited to red or orange colors—an adjustment based on concerns that those colors are less visible against the red sands of southern Utah. This change was important to users that sported club or US flags on their rigs.

Utah legislators also continue to support funding for the **OHV grant program**, which helps maintain and improve riding opportunities throughout the state.

United States Congress

At the federal level, Utah's congressional delegation has been active and supportive on public-lands issues affecting recreation.

For example:

- **Senator Mike Lee** and **Representative Celeste Maloy** supported the **Congressional Review Act (CRA)** addressing the Glen Canyon OHV route closure.
- Lee and Maloy also are principal sponsors in efforts to challenge the **2025 Grand Staircase National Monument Management Plan with a CRA**, which would otherwise significantly restrict OHV access within the monument.

Other legislative initiatives initiated and/or supported by all members of the Utah delegation related to public-lands management include:

- **Outdoor Americans with Disabilities Act**
- **Western Economic Mobility Act (WEST Act)**
- **Historic Roadways Protection Act (RS-2477)**
- **Fix Our Forests Act**

Much of our interaction with Congress occurs through **staff members**, who are responsible for reviewing information, communicating with stakeholders, and advising elected officials. Maintaining strong working relationships with staff is essential for effective advocacy.

UPLA also hired a **Washington, D.C. policy advocate** to monitor federal developments and engage with the Administration and Legislature. With **300–400 pages published daily in the Federal Register alone**, let alone keeping track of important committee hearings to stay informed requires constant monitoring.

Litigation

Litigation remains one of the most important tools for defending motorized access—but it is also complex and extremely expensive.

UPLA's board has chosen not to pursue litigation directly. Instead, we support organizations with established legal programs. We have identified BlueRibbon Coalition is the organization best equipped to represent OHV legally.

In the past two years, **UPLA has contributed \$142,500 to the BlueRibbon Coalition** to support legal efforts protecting motorized recreation. We are currently raising an additional **\$50,000** to continue that support.

Closing

When I was twelve years old driving that old Jeep across the hills of my grandfather's farm, I had no idea that access to places like that could someday be at risk. Back then, if a road washed out or a trail disappeared, we simply fixed it and kept going. Today, the challenges are much different—but the responsibility is the same.

If we want future generations to experience the same freedom to explore the backcountry that many of us grew up with, we have to stay informed, stay engaged, and support the organizations that are fighting to protect those opportunities.

UPLA will continue doing everything we can to defend responsible motorized recreation in Utah, but we can only succeed with the support of the community that depends on these lands.

Everyone involved in motorized recreation knows this is not an inexpensive hobby; **I encourage everyone who values access to public lands to consider dedicating a portion of their recreation budget to supporting the organizations that defend those opportunities.**

Tax-advantaged giving options also available include:

- appreciated stock donations
- real-property contributions
- donor-advised funds
- qualified charitable IRA distributions

You can learn more about these opportunities and make a tax-deductible contribution on our website at [Donate to Help Protect Utah's Public Lands – Utah Public Lands Alliance](#)



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Sincerely,

Loren Campbell
President, Utah Public Lands Alliance