

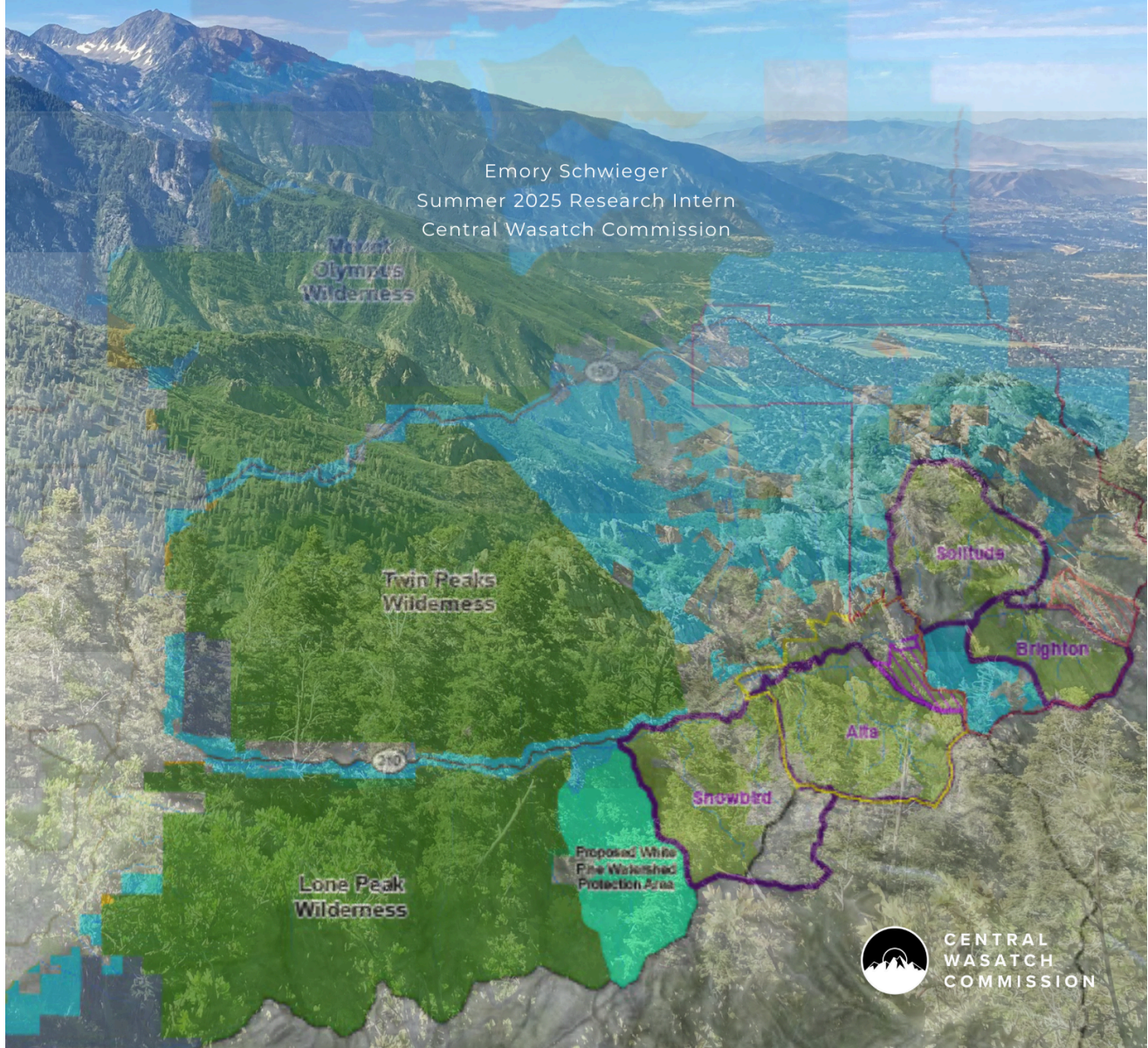
Assessing Federal Designation Pathways for Utah's Central Wasatch Mountains:
Reflections on Mountain Accord's Vision and Lessons from Sawtooth and Santa Monica
Mountains NRAs

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Introduction



Since the early 20th century, Congress has used a variety of federal land designations to balance conservation and public use. These designations provide opportunities to protect vital lands across the United States. Congress can designate lands as national parks, wilderness, national conservation areas, national recreation areas, and more. These types of federal lands are chosen to meet a wide range of goals within wildlife and resource conservation, recreation access, cultural and historic preservation, and scientific research.¹ The first National Recreation Area, Lake Mead, was officially designated in 1964. As new NRAs were created, some landscapes in need of management did not fit the existing NRA framework. In 1970, Congress addressed this gap by creating the King Range National Conservation Area (KRNCA), a new designation tailored to the remote and ecologically sensitive California coastline. The designation enabled conservation while allowing for controlled recreation and local management.² Today, similarly complex regions like the Wasatch Mountains face mounting pressures that challenge existing federal models and call for a close look at which designation tools are best suited for these challenges.

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, *America's Public Lands Explained* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023), <https://www.doi.gov/blog/americas-public-lands-explained>.

² Ann Morgan and Doug Cannon, *King Range National Conservation Area Case Study* (Boulder, CO: Natural Resources Law Center, University of Colorado School of Law, 2004).

The Central Wasatch Mountains, just east of Salt Lake City, are a complex and highly popular landscape that include a national forest, critical watersheds, major ski resorts, and growing year-round recreation. These elements support Utah's economy and quality of life, but also generate growing visitor demand, causing recreation pressure, ecosystem strain, and land use conflict. Managing the region involves balancing conservation needs, high visitation, land ownership boundaries, and transportation challenges.

In 2013, the Mountain Accord was launched as a two-year initiative to chart a long-term vision for the Central Wasatch. Signed in July 2015, the Accord brought together local governments, ski resorts, state and federal agencies, environmental groups, transportation experts, and the public to create a consensus-based framework for balancing conservation, watershed protection, recreation, and transportation. A cornerstone of the Accord was the pursuit of federal legislation to implement balanced solutions to the issues the Central Wasatch faces.

One outcome of the Mountain Accord was the proposed Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area (CWNCRRA), which emerged from the Mountain Accord process as a potential legislative solution.³ As a new hybrid designation, the CWNCRRA would combine elements of recreation and conservation designations into a hybrid framework to protect watersheds, preserve scenic and recreational values, manage visitation, and improve interagency coordination.⁴ This proposed designation aims to maintain ecosystem integrity, preserve recreational and scenic values, protect critical watersheds, manage rising visitation through transportation improvements, and create pathways for concentrated development while

³ Central Wasatch Commission, *Legislation and Federal Designation*, revised February 2025, <https://cwc.utah.gov/legislation-and-federal-designation/>.

⁴ Central Wasatch Commission, *Legislation and Federal Designation*, revised February 2025, <https://cwc.utah.gov/legislation-and-federal-designation/>.

respecting existing land uses and private property.⁵ The need for this designation is urgent, driven by a growing population along the Wasatch Front metropolitan area, development pressure within the canyons, climate change vulnerabilities, transportation strain, and the fragmentation of management authority across the region. The proposed designation reflects the region's unique character, but ten years after the Mountain Accord, it is worth reevaluating whether a novel hybrid designation is necessary or whether an existing model, such as a well-written NRA, could achieve the same outcomes with more feasibility.

At the same time, the Mountain Accord created the Central Wasatch Commission (CWC), the intergovernmental entity tasked with carrying forward the Accord's commitments. Established to address the area's complex land use, environmental, transportation, and recreation challenges, the CWC includes representatives from Salt Lake City and County, UDOT, the U.S. Forest Service, ski resorts, conservation groups, and other key stakeholders.⁶ Its mission is to coordinate across jurisdictional boundaries to develop sustainable, long-term strategies that ensure the Central Wasatch ecosystem remains healthy, recreation opportunities continue, and transportation meets peoples' needs without compromising the integrity of the mountains. By working collaboratively and transparently, the CWC seeks to establish a federal framework that balances protection with access, preserving the Central Wasatch for generations to come.

In addition to legislative histories and case studies, this report incorporates insights from stakeholder interviews with land managers, conservation advocates, and policy experts, including Paul Sever (King Range NCA, BLM), Shaaron Netherton (Friends of Nevada Wilderness), and Ben Katz (Conservation Lands Foundation). These perspectives provide

⁵ CWC, *Legislation*, 2025

⁶ Central Wasatch Commission, *About*, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://cwc.utah.gov/about/>.

practical lessons on how different designations operate, the political realities of advancing legislation, and the opportunities and challenges for applying these models in the Central Wasatch.

This report examines how federal land designations have historically been used, how they function today, and whether a hybrid designation is still the most effective path forward for the Central Wasatch. It explores the legal and ecological frameworks behind NRAs and NCAs, compares their management structures and policy goals, and analyzes relevant case studies, including Lake Mead NRA (Nevada), King Range NCA (California), Sawtooth NRA (Idaho), and Santa Monica Mountains NRA (California). Drawing on these examples, as well as insights from the Mountain Accord process and recent stakeholder conversations, the report assesses the available options for federal designation in the Central Wasatch. Ultimately, this report evaluates which federal designation types best meet the needs of the Central Wasatch, considering the region's unique context, weighing the limitations of each model, and examining whether the goals of the CWNCRRA could be addressed within existing frameworks.

Federal Designations- NCAs, NRAs, & Wilderness

Before weighing what kind of federal designation best fits the Central Wasatch, it helps to first understand the origins, purposes, and management structures of the existing models for National Recreation Areas and National Conservation Areas. National Recreation Areas (NRAs) are federally designated landscapes focused on recreation access. Historically, these designations have been located around reservoirs and near urban centers, emphasizing the importance of tourism and the pressures of recreation on protected areas.⁷ NRAs are managed by federal

⁷ U.S. DOI, *America's Public Lands Explained*

agencies such as the National Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), depending on the land's characteristics, location, and purpose. In contrast, National Conservation Areas (NCAs) are designated specifically to conserve natural resources, cultural landscapes, and historical sites. NCAs do not have standardized requirements for congressional designation; however, they must offer ecological, cultural, or scenic value to the nation.⁸ These areas are managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA).⁹ King Range, as the first NCA, introduced a conservation-minded, collaborative model that continues to shape public land policy today.

Existing federal designations, such as NRAs and NCAs, offer valuable tools for land protection, but neither was designed to address the complex mix of recreation, watershed management, transportation infrastructure, and ecosystem health that defines the Central Wasatch. Understanding how these existing designations function helps assess whether one of them, or a hybrid approach, could effectively address the Central Wasatch's unique mix of high visitation, ecological sensitivity, and jurisdictional complexity. A National Conservation and Recreation Area (NCRA), as proposed for the Central Wasatch, would intentionally combine elements of both models by supporting recreation while prioritizing long-term watershed protection, ecosystem resilience, and interagency coordination.

⁸ U.S. DOI, *America's Public Lands Explained*; Bureau of Land Management, *Monuments and NCAs*, accessed 2025, <https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/monuments-ncas>.

⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, ed., *The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, as Amended*, September 20116.

National Conservation Areas

National Conservation Areas (NCAs) are federal lands designated by Congress to conserve natural resources, scenic landscapes, and historic or cultural sites. Unlike many other land designations, NCAs don't have standardized requirements before designation, but they must hold ecological, cultural, or scenic value important to the nation.¹⁰ Additionally NCAs can include different land types within them, like Wilderness. NCAs require congressional approval and must be managed under a public process, with Resource Management Plans (RMPs) developed through National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) mandated environmental review, Tribal consultation, and community engagement.¹¹ NCAs are managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976, which established the principle that public lands remain federally owned and are managed for multiple uses like balancing conservation, recreation, grazing, resource extraction, and cultural preservation.¹² FLPMA also gave Congress the authority to create NCAs and required the BLM to develop science-based RMPs that prioritize both conservation and responsible use. FLPMA established multiple-use and sustained yield principles for all public lands, but NCAs are exceptions where specific legislation limits some uses to protect special values.¹³

Unlike standard BLM lands managed under multiple-use principles, NCAs are distinguished by place-specific legislation and management plans that elevate conservation priorities over extractive or industrial uses. This allows NCAs to more directly protect ecological integrity, cultural heritage, and recreational quality. According to BLM Instruction Memorandum

¹⁰ U.S. DOI, *America's Public Lands Explained*.

¹¹ U.S. Congress, *National Environmental Policy Act of 1969*, Public Law 91–190, 83 Stat. 852 (1970).

¹² U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, ed., *The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, As Amended*, accessed 2025.

¹³ U.S. DOI, BLM, ed., *The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, as Amended*.

2016-005, all NLCS units, including NCAs, must be managed using science-based strategies that prioritize conservation of designated values while allowing compatible uses.¹⁴ This provides national consistency while still allowing flexibility in local implementation.

Funding for NCAs is another unique challenge. The nation's 19 NCAs don't have dedicated funding streams within the BLM, so they rely on annual congressional appropriations distributed through the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS).¹⁵ The NLCS is a program created in 2000 and made permanent in 2009 by the Omnibus Public Land Management Act to support federal conservation lands, including the BLM managed areas.¹⁶ This lack of strong funding can lead to understaffing and delayed maintenance. Partnerships with nonprofits, volunteer groups, and state or Tribal agencies also play a key role in filling funding gaps and implementing conservation projects. The BLM manages nearly 245 million acres of land across the United States, meaning the funding they receive gets spread thin. NCAs are one component of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS), which includes national monuments, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, and more, together protecting over 38 million acres of the most ecologically and culturally significant public lands managed by BLM. According to Paul Sever, NCAs do receive dedicated organizational codes and managers, but because the NLCS budget remains "relatively stable," each new designation means "more slices of pie" and therefore less funding per unit.¹⁷ However, he noted that the "prestige" of

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, *Instruction Memorandum No. 2016-005: Nationally Important Conservation Lands* (January 29, 2016), accessed 2025.

¹⁵ U.S. DOI, BLM, *Instruction Memorandum No. 2016-005*.

¹⁶ U.S. Congress, *Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009*, Public Law 111–11, 123 Stat. 991 (2009).

¹⁷ Paul Sever, email correspondence with the author, June 24, 2025, Bureau of Land Management, King Range National Conservation Area.

designation often helps leverage grants and outside funding, giving NCAs more visibility and political weight than surrounding BLM lands.¹⁸

For example, King Range NCA, the nation's first National Conservation Area, has an organizational code within BLM budgeting, and its manager oversees decisions and staff, but the money received has to stretch across many needs. To fill these gaps, NCAs depend heavily on partnerships, volunteers, and creative funding sources. At King Range, 100% of recreation fees are reinvested locally in trail maintenance, visitor education, and facilities. According to Sever, community partnerships and volunteer support are not supplementary but central to NCA management. The King Range Alliance, composed of groups like Friends of the Lost Coast and the Mattole Restoration Council, contributes restoration projects, youth education, and long-term stewardship capacity that the BLM could not sustain on its own. Additional funding often comes from sources like the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which provides non-taxpayer dollars for land acquisition, public access, and habitat protection, as well as grants from nonprofits, foundations, and state agencies.¹⁹

King Range National Conservation Area (KRNCA) was designated in 1970 along California's rugged Lost Coast.²⁰ The area's terrain was too steep and wild for highway development, making its protection both justifiable and symbolic. King Range set the precedent for NCAs by showing how a BLM-managed area could restrict activities like mining, new road construction, and motorized recreation to protect fragile ecosystems, wildlife habitat, and

¹⁸ Paul Sever, email correspondence with the author, June 24, 2025, Bureau of Land Management, King Range National Conservation Area.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of the Interior, ed., *Land and Water Conservation Fund: Overview and Programs Sheet*, accessed 2025.

²⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, ed., *King Range National Conservation Area*, accessed 2025.

Indigenous cultural sites, while still offering recreational opportunities.²¹ Like other NCAs, King Range is managed under a site-specific RMP created with public input and focused on conservation goals. Though King Range predated the FLPMA, it became a model for future NCAs under the Act's framework.

Paul Sever, manager of the King Range NCA, emphasized that the NCA designation helps bring attention and prestige to the landscape, which can aid in securing grants and special funding and foster a sense of public stewardship.²² He also noted that community and Tribal partnerships have been central to King Range's success. The BLM works closely with groups like the King Range Alliance, Tribes, and local organizations on habitat restoration, cultural resource protection, youth internships, and educational programs. Sever highlighted Tribal collaboration as a defining feature of the King Range NCA, with the BLM working with Mattole and Sinkyone peoples on ceremonial use, cultural site protection, and ecological restoration.²³ The BLM works with Tribal partners to restore natural and cultural landscapes and to identify, monitor, and protect cultural sites. These collaborations provide services and outcomes that the BLM could not achieve alone.

NCAs are a flexible tool for balancing conservation with recreation and other public uses. They can be tailored to the specific values of each landscape, and they demonstrate how federal land designations can evolve through local collaboration, public engagement, and adaptive management.

²¹ Colorado Law Scholarly Commons, *Federal-State Local Intergovernmental Cooperation and Conflict*. Scholar.law.Colorado.edu, accessed 2025.

²² Paul Sever, BLM Manager for the King Range National Conservation Area, email correspondence by author, June 24, 2025.

²³ Paul Sever, KRNCA.

National Recreation Areas

National Recreation Areas (NRAs), in contrast to NCAs, offer a recreation-forward approach that has evolved significantly since the mid-20th century. National Recreation Areas are federally designated protected areas established by Congress to provide enhanced recreational opportunities while conserving natural and scenic resources.²⁴ Today, there are 40 NRAs in 26 states, most overseen by the National Park Service or U.S. Forest Service, depending on the site's origins and needs. The BLM is rarely involved in the management of NRAs, with the exception of the White Mountain NRA in Fairbanks, Alaska.²⁵ NRAs were historically linked to reservoirs and dam projects, but the definition has since expanded to include natural areas near urban centers, where recreation infrastructure meets the need for necessary land protection. In recent decades, NRAs like Golden Gate and Chattahoochee have served as models for providing "close-to-home" recreation in urban and suburban settings, highlighting the adaptability of the NRA model to different contexts.

NRAs arose in settings where balancing outdoor use, development, and conservation was critical, and they typically include infrastructure such as roads, campgrounds, trails, and visitor facilities.²⁶ They are established in diverse environments, including areas around reservoirs, national forests, and urban regions. Similar to NCAs, NRAs can also accommodate other designations within them. For example, multiple NRA's have wilderness designation areas within their borders, including Sawtooth NRA (ID), Lake Mead NRA (NV), Glen Canyon NRA (UT), Mount Rogers NRA (VA) and more. Due to their accessibility and variety of permitted activities, NRAs are among the most visited types of federally protected areas. Most NRAs allow

²⁴ U.S. DOI, *America's Public Lands Explained*.

²⁵ Bureau of Land Management, *What We Manage — Alaska*, accessed 2025, from BLM.gov.

²⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, ed., *NPS Designations: National Recreation Areas*, accessed 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/nps-designations.htm>.

multiple-use management, such as grazing or logging, as long as the activities do not interfere with recreational goals. This approach distinguishes them from more restrictive designations like national parks or wilderness areas.

While NCAs lack dedicated funding streams and rely on limited BLM-wide appropriations, NRAs sometimes benefit from additional tools like site-specific legislation, concessions, and regional funding programs such as the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA). As a result, there is significant variation in how NRAs are structured and managed across the country. Resource use, such as grazing or mineral leasing, can be allowed if it does not interfere with recreation uses. “Active mines are often grandfathered in, but new leases are restricted under the 1976 Mining in the Parks Act.”²⁷ While this Act restricted new mining claims in many NPS-managed NRAs, other NRAs, particularly those managed by the Forest Service, may still allow extractive uses, typically logging, unless prohibited by their specific legislation.

Funding for NRAs comes through annual congressional appropriations, with NPS supporting them through its base operations budget, USFS through its Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness program, and BLM through its general planning appropriations. NRAs also generate income from recreation fees, entrance passes, private concessions, and partnerships with friends groups, nonprofits, and volunteers. Unlike NCAs, which rely heavily on general BLM appropriations with no dedicated funding stream, NRAs often benefit from site-specific funding sources and support from nonprofit friends groups. For instance, Lake Mead NRA receives funds through the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA), which supports visitor

²⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Mining on National Park Service Lands—What Is at Stake?*, EMD-81-119, August 28, 1981, <https://www.gao.gov/products/emd-81-119>.

infrastructure, habitat restoration, and conservation education projects through proceeds from land sales near Las Vegas.

The first formal NRA was Lake Mead, created following the construction of Hoover Dam in 1936. This NRA spans nearly 1.5 million acres and three desert ecosystems: the Mojave, Great Basin, and Sonoran. While the area around Hoover Dam was first called the Boulder Dam Recreation Area in 1936 and managed informally by the NPS, it was not formally established as a National Recreation Area until 1964, reflecting how early NRAs were often created on an ad hoc basis without standardized legislation. The name change and congressional designation formally transferred Lake Mead management from the Bureau of Reclamation to the National Park Service.²⁸ Over the following decades, outdoor recreation became increasingly important in American life, and visitation at Lake Mead grew rapidly. By the 1940s and 1950s, the NPS began to push for a congressional designation that would provide clear jurisdiction, dedicated funding, and long-term management for the area. In 1964, Congress passed Public Law 88-639, officially designating the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, marking the first time Congress created a National Recreation Area with a formal structure.²⁹ Funding for Lake Mead comes from NPS appropriations, recreation fees, and sources like the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA), which provides funds for improvements like trail management and visitor centers.

Though designed for recreation, many NRAs now encompass significant conservation zones. Lake Mead, for example, contains nine designated wilderness areas, preserving over 200,000 acres of fragile desert ecosystems. Over time, Congress began to formalize the NRA's

²⁸ National Park Service, *Foundation Document Overview — Lake Mead National Recreation Area*, accessed 2025.

²⁹ National Park Service, *Lake Mead NRA: Timeline*.

purposes, particularly under the Forest Service, by integrating recreation with natural and cultural preservation. NRAs like Sawtooth NRA (1972) reflect this shift, emphasizing watershed protection and ecological health alongside visitor access.

The proposed Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area (CWNCRA) reflects this evolution in protected land designations. It aims to balance high visitor use, watershed protection, and environmental resilience in a complex mountain ecosystem near a major urban center. Like earlier NRAs shaped by local needs, the CWNCRA draws on lessons from models like Sawtooth NRA, adapting national tools to meet the specific challenges of the Wasatch Front.

Wilderness Designation

Wilderness designation is the highest level of federal land protection in the United States, established under the Wilderness Act of 1964. It applies to areas that are undeveloped, natural, and provide opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation. These lands are permanently protected by Congress and are closed to roads, motorized vehicles, and permanent infrastructure, preserving their wild character.³⁰ While some limited uses, such as hiking, horseback riding, and traditional grazing, may be allowed, they must not compromise the area's "untrammelled" nature.³¹ Wilderness designation is intended to ensure that future generations can experience lands that remain largely untouched by industrial development. In the Central Wasatch, proposed wilderness additions through the CWNCRA would help preserve critical headwaters, alpine ecosystems, and scenic ridgelines while balancing nearby recreation and access needs.

³⁰ Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "About Wilderness." *SUWA*, accessed 2025. <https://suwa.org/about-2/>.

³¹ SUWA. "About Wilderness." <https://suwa.org/about-2/>.

Together, NRAs, NCAs, and Wilderness designations provide the main federal tools for balancing conservation and recreation. Yet the Mountain Accord stakeholders felt that none of these designations alone fully captured the complex mix of watershed protection, recreation demand, and jurisdictional overlap in the Central Wasatch, leading them to propose a hybrid model, the CWNCRRA.

NRA Case Studies

Sawtooth NRA

The Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA) was established by Congress in 1972 through Public Law 92-400 to preserve and protect over 756,000 acres of central Idaho's forests, lakes, rivers, and alpine landscapes.³² More than half of the area of Sawtooth NRA is designated Wilderness, including the Sawtooth Wilderness, White Clouds Wilderness, Jerry Peak Wilderness, and Hemingway - Boulder Wilderness. Managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the SNRA was created to protect recreation values and conservation goals in the Sawtooth National Forest. The Sawtooth NRA and its emphasis on both conservation and recreation provide a strong precedent for the Central Wasatch Mountains. Before the area's designation, the mountains of central Idaho had long been recognized as significant landscapes and were even considered for National Park status. However, local opposition to that designation favored an alternative that would allow continued recreation, hunting, grazing, and private land ownership while offering strong public lands protection.³³

³² *Public Law 92-400: An Act to Establish the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in the State of Idaho*, 86 Stat. 612 (August 22, 1972).

³³ Sawtooth Society, "Why the Sawtooth Society Exists," April 27, 2023, <https://sawtoothsociety.org/2023/04/27/why-the-sawtooth-society-exists/>.

The urgency for congressional action intensified in the late 1970s in response to widespread local and national resistance to a proposed open-pit molybdenum mine at Castle Peak in the White Cloud Mountains.³⁴ This resistance directly contributed to the passage of Public Law 92–400, which formally established the SNRA and designated the Sawtooth Wilderness. The law prioritized the protection of the area’s scenic, cultural, ecological, and recreational values while limiting large-scale development such as mining and major road construction.³⁵ Choosing a National Recreation Area designation, rather than a National Park, reflected Idahoans’ desire to balance conservation with traditional land uses, allowing some activities like grazing and hunting while prohibiting harmful commercial mining. The SNRA’s diverse landscapes also provide critical habitat for sensitive species like salmon and wolverines, support healthy watersheds relied upon by 31,000 residents, and sustain a mix of uses including grazing, timber harvesting for restoration, and outdoor recreation.³⁶

The SNRA encompasses nearly 800,000 acres in central Idaho, a predominantly rural region where recreation is a vital economic driver. The area receives approximately 1.2 million annual visitors, with popular activities including hiking, skiing, and wildlife-related recreation.³⁷ Just south of the SNRA lies Sun Valley, a well-known ski resort that contributes to seasonal visitation and helps generate approximately \$81.5 million in annual local economic activity.³⁸ While Sun Valley draws considerable recreation traffic, the Central Wasatch, located adjacent to a major metropolitan area, sees over 7 million annual visitors and faces significantly greater pressure on infrastructure, access, and watershed protection.

³⁴ “Why the Sawtooth Society Exists.”

³⁵ “Why the Sawtooth Society Exists.”

³⁶ U.S. Forest Service, *Benefits to People: Sawtooth National Recreation Area, ID* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022), <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Sawtooth-BTP-Report-508.pdf>.

³⁷ USFS, Benefits to People - Sawtooth.

³⁸ USFS, Benefits to People - Sawtooth.

Today, the SNRA offers extensive recreation opportunities, including hiking, fishing, river rafting, hunting, and backcountry skiing. Its scenic resources contribute to the region's sense of place, tourism economy, and quality of life. The SNRA is supported by groups like the Sawtooth Society. The Society was founded in 1997 in response to a proposed 160-acre subdivision in the Stanley Basin.³⁹ The group successfully halted the project and helped secure \$17 million in federal funding to acquire conservation easements, permanently protecting 13 properties.⁴⁰ Since then, its mission has been to preserve, protect, and enhance the SNRA through advocacy, recreation improvements, collaborative stewardship, and volunteer engagement. The Society works with the Forest Service, local governments, and other stakeholders to advocate for protection, fund stewardship, and implement education programs.⁴¹

In addition to national appropriations, the Sawtooth Society has also pioneered local funding tools. In 2000, the Sawtooth Society launched the 'goat plate', a specialty license plate, in coordination with Idaho's legislature and Department of Parks and Recreation. The plate has a Sawtooth famous mountain goat, which represents "the human need to find high, quiet places."⁴² Priced at \$60 initially (with \$40 annual renewal), 100% of the proceeds go directly into a quarterly administered grants fund that supports recreation-enhancement projects solely within the SNRA.⁴³ The program has generated approximately \$50,000 per year, funding over 200 projects, from trail repairs and signage to restroom facilities and avalanche forecasting. Since its inception, the goat plate has provided nearly \$1 million to SNRA improvements.⁴⁴ Beyond its monetary contribution, the Goat Plate also symbolizes widespread community investment in

³⁹ Sawtooth Society, "Our Why – Learn More," accessed 2025, <https://sawtoothsociety.org/our-why-learn-more/>.

⁴⁰ Why the Sawtooth Society Exists."

⁴¹ Sawtooth Society, "What We Do," accessed 2025, <https://sawtoothsociety.org/what-we-do/>

⁴² Sawtooth Society, "Goat Plate," accessed 2025, <https://goatplate.sawtoothsociety.org/#goat>.

⁴³ Sawtooth Society, "Goat Plate."

⁴⁴ Sawtooth Society, "Goat Plate."

recreation lands. Despite these protections and partnerships, the SNRA continues to face challenges, including invasive species, wildfire risk, development pressure, and the ongoing need to balance recreation with long-term conservation goals.

In addition to these local funding mechanisms, SNRA projects also benefit from federal appropriations through the U.S. Forest Service, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and grants from local and private sources. The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) has played a critical role in the long-term protection of landscapes across the country, including the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. Since 1972, the Forest Service has used LWCF funds to acquire conservation easements that safeguard approximately 17,000 acres of private ranch lands within the SNRA, protecting recreation opportunities while allowing historic uses like ranching to continue.⁴⁵ This approach helped preserve the area's open-space character without requiring full land acquisition, offering a valuable precedent for the Central Wasatch, where stakeholders prefer voluntary easements over condemnation. Idaho has received over \$305 million in LWCF funding, which has supported the protection of other nationally significant landscapes like the Hells Canyon NRA and the Middle Fork Salmon River.⁴⁶ The SNRA's success in the use of federal funds demonstrates how federal lands can balance conservation, recreation, and historic uses.

In terms of infrastructure, SNRA supports recreation and multiple uses through 1,900 miles of roads and 2,400 miles of trails.⁴⁷ Supporters of the SNRA emphasized maintaining existing uses within limits, particularly timber harvesting, which the Forest Service continues for

⁴⁵ Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition, *Idaho and the Land and Water Conservation Fund: Protecting Idaho's Outdoor Heritage*, accessed 2025, <https://lwcfcoalition.org/>.

⁴⁶ LWCF, Idaho.

⁴⁷ USFS, Benefits to People - Sawtooth.

fire management and to support the local economy.⁴⁸ The SNRA's land management approach balances multiple uses, including limited timber harvesting, grazing, and non-metallic mineral extraction, so long as these activities do not impair scenic, ecological, or recreational values.⁴⁹ While the SNRA safeguards tributaries to the Salmon River, providing drinking water for roughly 31,000 residents, the Wasatch Range supplies water to hundreds of thousands in the Salt Lake Valley, making the case for federal watershed protection even stronger.⁵⁰

Legislatively, the SNRA authorized the federal government to acquire land, mineral rights, and scenic easements by purchase, exchange, or donation.⁵¹ It also permitted zoning regulations for private land to maintain consistency with the area's purpose. The SNRA was the first National Forest unit to use scenic easements as part of their central plan, allowing the protection of private lands without full acquisition.⁵² Federal funding was a key element of the SNRA's establishment, with nearly \$46 million authorized for land acquisition and development.⁵³ SNRA legislation also included a national park feasibility study, which may serve as a model for adaptive planning in the CWNCRRA legislative text, allowing future updates as land use needs evolve.⁵⁴

The Sawtooth National Recreation Area offers a strong precedent for the Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area (CWNCRRA) proposal, with both designations

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, "Discover History: Sawtooth National Forest," Last updated April 1, 2025, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r04/sawtooth/recreation/discover-history>

⁴⁹ *An Act to Establish the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in the State of Idaho*, Public Law 92-400, 86 Stat. 612 (August 22, 1972), § 2(a); *Code of Federal Regulations*, Title 36, Section 292.17.

⁵⁰ USFS, Benefits to People - Sawtooth.

⁵¹ *Public Law 92-400: Establish the SNRA*.

⁵² James Dawson, "The Balancing Act of Conservation Easements in the SNRA," *Boise State Public Radio*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.boisestatepublicradio.org/news/2022-08-18/the-balancing-act-of-conservation-easements-in-the-snra>.

⁵³ *Public Law 92-400: An Act to Establish the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in the State of Idaho*, 86 Stat. 612, § 13 (August 22, 1972)

⁵⁴ *Public Law 92-400: Sawtooth National Recreation Area Act*, 86 Stat. 612, § 14 (August 22, 1972), codified at 16 U.S.C. § 460aa-14(a).

aiming to protect scenic, historic, ecological, and recreational values while honoring existing land uses. The two designations share many values, including a desire to protect cultural and historic resources, enhance recreation, and support collaborative management models. For example, the SNRA engages about 39,000 people annually through conservation education and helps preserve landscapes tied to traditional uses.⁵⁵ The Forest Service emphasizes the SNRA's scenic value for mental health, community identity, and artistic inspiration, which mirrors the Central Wasatch's role as a cultural and visual anchor for the Salt Lake Valley.⁵⁶ However, the Central Wasatch lies adjacent to a major metropolitan area and receives over 3.2 million annual visitors, creating more intense pressures on infrastructure, access, and watersheds.⁵⁷

While the SNRA supports recreation through extensive trail and road networks, CWNCRAs discussions emphasize sustainable transportation and voluntary land acquisition without condemnation. SNRA's flexible, conservation-first model, including scenic easements and strong federal funding, demonstrates how public land protections can balance preservation with public access. The CWNCRAs would likely expand on this model by phasing out extractive uses and prioritizing watershed protection, transit planning, and collaborative management in line with goals outlined in the Mountain Accord.

Ultimately, the SNRA demonstrates how a National Recreation Area can blend federal oversight with local partnerships to safeguard treasured lands. Its creation was prompted by escalating pressures, real estate speculation, proposals for an open-pit molybdenum mine, rapid growth in recreation and tourism, and concerns about protecting the Salmon River watershed.

⁵⁵ USFS, Benefits to People - Sawtooth.

⁵⁶ USFS, Benefits to People - Sawtooth.

⁵⁷ Utah State University, Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, *Visitor Use in the Central Wasatch Mountains: 2021–2022 Report*, prepared for the Central Wasatch Commission, January 2023, https://cwc.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Central_Wasatch_Survey_Report-1.pdf.

Local governments and the Forest Service lacked the tools to address these competing pressures, which spurred bipartisan support for federal action and the establishment of the SNRA.

The Central Wasatch faces strikingly similar dynamics today. Ski area expansion proposals, intense recreation demand, and rapid population growth in the Salt Lake Valley threaten watershed health, scenic quality, and community access, echoing the development and resource-use conflicts that once confronted the Sawtooths. Just as the Sawtooth Society later emerged to steward the NRA alongside federal managers, the Central Wasatch Commission has become a collaborative basis for balancing conservation, recreation, and local needs. In both places, the value of scenery, water, and recreation outweighs extractive uses, making a recreation- and conservation-minded designation the logical path forward.

The Sawtooth example provides not only a legislative precedent but also a clear parallel: when landscapes of national significance face incompatible development pressures, federal designation can provide the framework to balance access and preservation, scenic protection and property rights, and local governance with federal oversight.

Santa Monica Mountains NRA

The Santa Monica Mountains NRA (SMMNRA) was established by the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978, signed into law by President Jimmy Carter. This Act was one of the most significant pieces of conservation legislation in the 70s. It significantly expanded and enhanced the National Park System, provided \$725 million to renovate recreation facilities in urban areas, and designated 1,974,005 acres as wilderness areas.⁵⁸ Section 507 of this Act

⁵⁸ S. 791 — *National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978*, 95th Cong. (1977–1978), accessed 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/95th-congress/senate-bill/791>.

officially established the SMMNRA as the 295th unit of the National Park System. Considered to be one of the “most complex” units in the Park System, the NRA has more than “20 different land-owner types and more than 70 stakeholder groups.”⁵⁹ The SMMNRA is a cooperative effort managed by the National Park Service in collaboration with state and local agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private landowners.⁶⁰ Of the 153,250-acre area, approximately 84,000 acres are preserved for resource protection and public enjoyment, with the National Park Service directly managing about 23,500 acres, or 15% of the total land.⁶¹ One of the goals of the NRA was to piece together a mosaic of fragmented critical habitat areas, using coordinated land acquisition and conservation easements to ensure ecological connectivity.

The SMMNRA protects a vital Mediterranean biome that only exists in five regions in the world. This area is highly biodiverse and sensitive, and the land requires more careful, science-backed management practices. The Santa Monica Mountains contain “one of the highest concentrations of rare species in the United States.”⁶² The area is home to mountain lions, bobcats, the rare California red-legged frog, native, ground-nesting Turret bees, and many more.⁶³ These species are highly vulnerable and are constantly in need of further protection, especially from roads. A 2016 study done by researchers at UCLA, UC Davis, Utah State University, and NPS found that the Santa Monica mountain lions could become extinct in 50 years due to low genetic diversity, habitat loss and fragmentation, and vehicle collisions.⁶⁴ To

⁵⁹ National Park Service, “Park Management – About Us,” *Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area*, accessed 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/samo/learn/management/index.htm>.

⁶⁰ National Park Service, *Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Foundation Document Overview* (Thousand Oaks, CA: U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d.).

⁶¹ NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

⁶² NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

⁶³ Santa Monica Mountains Fund, “Our Wildlife,” *SAMO Fund: Official NPS Partner*, accessed August 14, 2025, <https://www.samofund.org/our-wildlife>.

⁶⁴ National Park Service, “Local Mountain Lion Population Faces Precipitous Decline in Genetic Diversity Within 50 Years, Possible Extinction,” news release, August 30, 2016, *Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area*,

help protect these endemic species and reduce all species collisions, the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing was proposed, and began construction in the spring of 2022. The vegetated bridge, which will be the largest wildlife crossing in the world, crosses US 101 to minimize impacts and help stabilize population levels. Similar to both the Sawtooth and the Central Wasatch Mountains, the Santa Monica Mountains provide a vital watershed for millions of people in Los Angeles. Not only do the mountains provide water and crucial wildlife habitat, but they also help maintain cleaner air for the region, a key ecosystem service. Due to the complex ecosystem of the Santa Monica Mountains, the NPS manages the area using “science-informed stewardship” to maintain high native biodiversity and habitat connectivity.⁶⁵

In addition to its ecological value, the Santa Monica Mountains hold vast cultural and historical significance. The region has been home to the Chumash and Tongva peoples for thousands of years and later saw the arrival of Spanish explorers, rancheros, and homesteaders.⁶⁶ Today, it remains a deeply human-impacted landscape, where historical and cultural narratives shape public understanding. The NPS manages several significant cultural sites, including Solstice Canyon and Rancho Sierra Vista/Satwiwa, that provide direct access to the mountains’ past. Within the designated NRA, there are over 1,000 archaeological sites representing more than 10,000 years of Native American history of the Chumash and Tongva peoples.⁶⁷ The SMMNRA also includes part of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, highlighting Spanish colonial history in California.⁶⁸ The area was famously a key site in the history of filmmaking, specifically Paramount Ranch, which stands as one of the old Hollywood “movie

<https://www.nps.gov/samo/learn/news/local-mountain-lion-population-faces-precipitous-decline-in-genetic-diversity-within-50-years-possible-extinction.htm>.

⁶⁵NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

⁶⁶ National Park Service, “History & Culture,” *Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area*, last modified January 13, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/samo/learn/historyculture/index.htm>.

⁶⁷ NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

⁶⁸ NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

ranches”, marking the shift from studio to on-site filming⁶⁹. Through archaeological research and the proper stewardship of the land, the SMMNRA works to protect the diverse stories and cultures that have defined the region for generations.

Like all NRAs, the SMMNRA receives some of its funding from annual appropriations to its governing body, in this case, the National Park Service. The Santa Monica Mountains NRA also has a dedicated NPS partner, called the SAMO Fund. The environmental nonprofit was founded in 1988 by a group of citizens, aiming to represent the public voice in development, recreation, and management decisions within the mountains.⁷⁰ SAMO Fund works directly with the NPS to support “education, science, research, facility restoration, citizen engagement, environmental stewardship, and philanthropy” efforts in the NRA.⁷¹ The NRA also gets other federal appropriations. In 2008, Congressman Brad Sherman announced that the U.S. Department of the Interior would provide \$356,000 in federal funds for environmental education and stewardship programs within the park.⁷² These included outdoor education programs for 10,000 underserved LAUSD students to experience nature and learn about the Park Service, watershed restoration activities that connected the classroom to real-world environmental stewardship, and an investment in BioBlitz, a 24-hour biodiversity survey that engages volunteers to catalog species across the park.⁷³ The park also collects user fees and private donations to help with projects, maintenance, land acquisitions, and enhancing access.

⁶⁹ NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

⁷⁰ Santa Monica Mountains Fund, *Annual Report 2023*, <https://samofund.org/financial>.

⁷¹ SAMO Fund, Annual Report 2023

⁷² Congressman Brad Sherman, “Sherman Announces Funding for Santa Monica Mountains,” press release, April 25, 2008, <https://sherman.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/sherman-announces-funding-for-santa-monica-mountains>.

⁷³ Congressman Sherman, 2008

The SMMNRA, located within Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, is widely considered the largest urban national park in the world. As a recreation “gateway” to public lands, it serves more than 18 million people within an hour’s drive and offers year-round access to hiking, biking, horseback riding, and coastal trails.⁷⁴ In 2023 alone, federal sites within the park recorded 759,352 visitors. A 2013 report found that the SMMNRA generated over \$26 million in local revenue and supported 332 jobs across hospitality, dining, and outdoor recreation sectors.⁷⁵ Importantly, this NRA is designed with equity in mind: public transit routes like MTA 534, MTA 302, and Santa Monica’s Big Blue Bus connect underserved urban communities directly to natural spaces.⁷⁶ This unique combination of high population density, multimodal access, and strong economic returns allows the SMMNRA to prioritize both recreation and equity. These priorities closely align with the goals of the proposed CWNCRRA, which also lies adjacent to a major metropolitan area and receives over 3.2 million visitors annually.

The SMMNRA provides a compelling example of how a federal designation can integrate equitable access, ecological stewardship, and economic benefits through coordinated, multi-agency management. Its establishment responded to intense urban pressures in Los Angeles: unchecked real estate development proposals, fragmented habitats divided by highways, and the need to protect scarce open space within a metropolitan setting. These challenges mirror those in the Central Wasatch, where population growth, recreation demand, and fragmented jurisdictional authority threaten watershed integrity and scenic quality.

⁷⁴ NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

⁷⁵ National Parks Conservation Association, “Join the Organizations That Support the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area,” *National Parks Conservation Association* (page stating economic benefits), accessed 2025, <https://www.npca.org/actions/288-join-the-organizations-that-support-the-santa-monica-mountains-national>.

⁷⁶ National Park Service, “Traffic & Travel Tips,” *Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area*, last updated December 18, 2014, <https://www.nps.gov/samo/planyourvisit/trafficandtraveltips.htm>.

Just as the SMMNRA linked together fragmented public and private lands through conservation easements, partnerships, and transit connections, the CWNCRRA seeks to stitch together multiple jurisdictions, balance ski infrastructure with preservation, and expand equitable access for a rapidly growing urban population. The SMMNRA demonstrates that even in highly urbanized regions, recreation-oriented NRAs can sustain biodiversity, cultural values, and community identity when supported by the right tools and partnerships, a precedent directly relevant to the Wasatch.

Mountain Accord & CWNCRRA

The idea of the Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area grew directly out of the Mountain Accord, a consensus-based planning initiative conducted from 2013 to 2015. The Accord brought together local governments, ski resorts, state and federal agencies, environmental groups, transportation experts, and the public to create a long-term vision for the Central Wasatch that balanced conservation, watershed protection, recreation, and transportation. Signed in July 2015, the Mountain Accord represented the culmination of three years of collaboration and was endorsed by the Governor of Utah, State legislative leaders, all surrounding local governments, federal and state agencies, ski areas, conservation groups, and private property owners, highlighting the breadth of consensus behind the agreement.⁷⁷ A cornerstone of the Accord was the pursuit of Congressional legislation to implement its commitments.

Meeting notes and planning documents outlined the principal goals that would shape the CWNCRRA legislation: protecting ecological and scenic values, restoring degraded resources,

⁷⁷ Central Wasatch Commission, *Legislative Summary and Explanation: 10/27/2020 Draft, Clean Version* (Salt Lake City, UT: Central Wasatch Commission, 2020), 1–5.

safeguarding watersheds and wildlife, limiting ski area expansion, applying adaptive management to fire and vegetation, and enabling land exchanges and acquisitions to consolidate management. The Executive Board explicitly emphasized these points. The document, *Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*, states:

*“[The] purpose [of the legislation is to] conserve and protect the ecological, natural, scenic, wilderness, cultural, historical, geological, and wildlife values of the area... protect, enhance, and restore the water quality and watershed resources.”*⁷⁸

*“[The legislation] does not allow ski area permit boundary expansion beyond what is authorized on the date of enactment... It provides for adaptive management for fire, avalanche, and vegetation management.”*⁷⁹

By January 2016, a draft bill was finalized and prepared for introduction in Washington, D.C., reflecting the view that no existing designation adequately captured the complex pressures of the Central Wasatch⁸⁰. In a December 2015 meeting, the Board gave “general approval to move the federal designation work forward without a name,” with options including “conservation management area, national monument, [and] recreation and conservation management area.”⁸¹ This process culminated in the creation of a novel hybrid designation, the National Conservation and Recreation Area.

Congressman Jason Chaffetz introduced H.R. 5718 in 2016, which was closely modeled on the Accord’s provisions, though the bill stalled after he departed from office.⁸² When the

⁷⁸Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*, September 11, 2015.

⁷⁹ Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Agreements*, 1.

⁸⁰ Mountain Accord, *Executive Board Meeting Notes*, January 11, 2016, 2.

⁸¹ Mountain Accord, *Executive Board Meeting Notes*, December 14, 2016, 2.

⁸² Central Wasatch Commission, *Legislative Summary and Explanation*, 3.

Central Wasatch Commission was established in 2017 to carry forward the Accord’s vision, it resumed development of federal legislation. Between 2018 and 2019, the CWC released multiple public drafts, refining wilderness boundaries, clarifying management of the White Pine Watershed Protection Area, and addressing recreation and transportation concerns.⁸³ One of the most contentious elements, the proposed land exchanges between ski areas and public lands, unraveled after Alta Ski Lifts withdrew its support, which catalyzed the eventual removal of those provisions from later drafts.⁸⁴ Despite these challenges, the CWC maintained its commitment to permanent protections by further shaping the hybrid NCRA model to capture the unique pressures and values of the Central Wasatch.

The CWNCRAs boundary would encircle approximately 93,800 acres of U.S. Forest Service, roadless, and wilderness lands.⁸⁵ The legislation designates about 6,300 acres as the new Mount Aire/Grandeur Peak Wilderness Area, expands the Lone Peak Wilderness by about 2,600 acres, the Mount Olympus Wilderness by about 700 acres, and the Twin Peaks Wilderness by about 470 acres, for a total of approximately 10,000 acres of new wilderness. In addition, the bill establishes the 1,800-acre White Pine Watershed Protection Area. After accounting for existing wilderness, new wilderness additions, and private lands such as ski resorts, about 26,000 acres of the remaining Forest Service land within the boundary would be managed under the CWNCRAs framework and management plan. In future iterations of the Act, some acreages could change. The bill’s provisions include watershed restoration, restrictions on ski area expansion to existing permit boundaries, adaptive management for fire and vegetation, and improved recreation infrastructure that supports access without degrading ecosystem health. Land acquisitions and fee

⁸³ Central Wasatch Commission, *Legislative Summary and Explanation*, 2-4.

⁸⁴ Central Wasatch Commission, *Legislative Summary and Explanation*, 1-2.

⁸⁵ Sageland Collaborative and Central Wasatch Commission, *CWNCRAs StoryMap* (ArcGIS), <https://sagelandcollab.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7d906427c6a646bf895e46b5d9a6eb3d>

authority would enable the Forest Service to reinvest directly in long-term stewardship, ensuring that the Wasatch can meet the demands of high visitation while protecting its ecological and watershed integrity.

The CWNCR proposal reflects the Mountain Accord's balanced vision of ecological protection, sustainable recreation, and multi-jurisdictional coordination. To achieve this balance, the legislation establishes six central components:

1. **Conservation and Watershed Protection:** Protects ecological, scenic, cultural, historical, and wildlife values, with special emphasis on water quality and watershed health. The Central Wasatch, especially Albion Basin, serves as a critical watershed for the Salt Lake Valley, making its protection a top priority. The proposal would create a new Watershed Protection Area that would limit motorized activities. It would also strengthen landscape connectivity, emphasizing ecosystem integrity in regional sustainability, particularly in an urban setting.⁸⁶
2. **Management Structure:** Maintains U.S. Forest Service oversight while mandating adaptive management strategies for fire, avalanche, and vegetation. These provisions align with National Forest System regulations while adding Wasatch-specific measures to support science-informed stewardship.⁸⁷
3. **Land Use Restrictions:** Freezes ski area permit boundaries at the date of enactment, explicitly preventing future expansion. Development is limited to nodal areas like the base zones of Alta and Brighton, which are already disturbed and served by infrastructure. This development approach, described in Mountain Accord planning

⁸⁶ Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*.

⁸⁷ Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*.

documents, aims to concentrate impact while protecting backcountry areas and integrating with future transit.⁸⁸ The legislation also calls for land acquisition and voluntary exchanges to support habitat connectivity and may adjust or expand existing wilderness boundaries, such as in the Mount Aire or Lone Peak areas.⁸⁹

4. **Recreation and Access:** Supports both developed and dispersed recreation while protecting solitude and minimizing ecological disruption. The Act calls for infrastructure such as trailheads and restrooms near transit hubs to ensure equitable access while reducing sprawl and without compromising ecosystem health.⁹⁰ It also works toward a ‘no net loss’ principle for backcountry access by protecting existing recreation and prioritizing sustainable transportation connections.⁹¹
5. **Funding and Fees:** Authorizes the Forest Service to collect and retain recreation-related fees for reinvestment in the Wasatch.⁹² It also enables appropriations, land transactions, and acquisitions or exchanges to improve long-term sustainability.⁹³ This funding structure is vital for managing high visitation in the Wasatch.
6. **Special Provisions:** Respects existing permitted uses such as grazing and utility infrastructure, provided they align with the Act’s conservation goals. Private holdings are excluded unless acquired voluntarily. The legislation prohibits new roads, ski terrain expansions, and resource extraction,⁹⁴ ensuring that infrastructure improvements do not spur unplanned sprawl.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Mountain Accord, *Framework for Combined Scenario*. Version 3a. November 12, 2014.

⁸⁹ Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*.

⁹⁰ Mountain Accord, *Mountain Accord Final Report*, July 2016, 6–7.

⁹¹ Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*, 1.

⁹² Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*.

⁹³ Mountain Accord, *Executive Board Meeting Notes*, December 14, 2016, 2.

⁹⁴ Central Wasatch Commission, *Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area Draft Legislation*, October 27, 2020, Commission Review Draft, sec. 3(f).

⁹⁵ Mountain Accord, *Summary of Federal Designation Legislation Agreements*, 2.

The Mountain Accord Final Report summarizes the rationale: "A federal designation would help protect the environment and recreational opportunities in the Central Wasatch Mountains for future generations while balancing existing uses."⁹⁶ These goals mirror successful elements of earlier designations such as the Sawtooth NRA and the Santa Monica Mountains NRA, emphasizing that a well-tailored NRA framework can be customized to achieve robust protections, high-quality recreation, and inclusive access for millions of annual visitors in an area as unique as the Central Wasatch.

Observations & Conclusions

While the Mountain Accord established the rationale and goals for federal designation, the central question remains how best to implement those commitments. The Mountain Accord Executive Committee itself initially wrestled with this question. In its April 2015 meeting, the Committee noted that the main disadvantage of pursuing a National Recreation Area designation was that an NRA “does not provide for enough watershed and environmental protection.”⁹⁷ This concern reflected a perception that NRAs were recreation-first designations that might not adequately safeguard the Central Wasatch’s ecological and watershed values. Yet, previous case studies of the Sawtooth and Santa Monica Mountains NRAs demonstrate that conservation can remain a central priority within NRA legislation. Sawtooth, for instance, was established with explicit watershed protections and wilderness expansions,⁹⁸ while Santa Monica integrates wildlife habitat conservation and land acquisitions into its framework despite its urban setting.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Mountain Accord, *Mountain Accord Final Report*, July 2016, 6–7.

⁹⁷ Mountain Accord, *Executive Board Meeting Notes*, April 6, 2015, 11.

⁹⁸ U.S. Congress, *Public Law 92-400*.

⁹⁹ NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

The goals of the proposed CWNCRRA align closely with what existing National Recreation Area legislation has already accomplished in places like the Sawtooth NRA and Santa Monica Mountains NRA. Both case studies demonstrate that NRAs can successfully integrate conservation priorities, recreation access, and multi-jurisdictional coordination. Sawtooth balances watershed protection, alpine ecosystem integrity, and recreation by combining fee retention, adaptive management tools, and wilderness designation protections.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the Santa Monica Mountains NRA manages a highly urban-adjacent landscape, using easements, partnerships, and multimodal transportation planning to sustain recreation equity while connecting fragmented habitat.¹⁰¹ The Central Wasatch faces very similar challenges: alpine watershed protection and high-use recreation near a growing metropolitan area. A tailored NRA, written with strong Wasatch-specific provisions, could allow Congress to deliver the same protections without creating an untested designation. These examples show that an NRA framework, when carefully drafted, is a viable option that could meet the Wasatch's conservation goals while retaining the political feasibility of an established designation.

Based on the case studies of both Sawtooth and the Santa Monica Mountains, NRAs are extremely diverse. They have a large range of what can be done within the enabling legislation, including co-management, private lands, watershed protections, and science-based management to protect biodiversity and ecologically sensitive lands. NRAs are not rigid, their enabling legislation can be written to reflect the specific values of any landscape. Sawtooth and Santa Monica prove that Congress has the flexibility to codify provisions necessary in the Wasatch. The SMMNRA is a prime example that NRA designations already offer enough flexibility to

¹⁰⁰ USFS, Benefits to People - Sawtooth.

¹⁰¹ NPS, SMMNRA Foundation Document Overview

handle urban landscapes like the Wasatch.¹⁰² The CWNCRAs six stated goals, watershed protection, adaptive management, limits on ski resort expansion, recreation access, fee reinvestment, and respect for existing uses, could all be achievable under an NRA framework. Ben Katz of the Conservation Lands Foundation reinforced this point, noting that “where the rubber meets the road is with the management plans... the title is less important than what is going to happen on the ground.”¹⁰³ His experience with federal lands shows that well-written legislation and RMPs can provide all the protections that the Wasatch needs.

Political feasibility is a benefit of an NRA. The Mountain Accord initially created the NCRA label with the concern that existing designations do not fulfill all the protections needed in the Central Wasatch, but as Shaaron Netherton, Executive Director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness, explained, “getting anything through Congress is almost impossible right now... a novel designation is incredibly difficult.”¹⁰⁴ She emphasized that the name itself is “not important,”¹⁰⁵ since existing designation frameworks already allow customized protections. NRAs also have long-standing bipartisan precedent, as dozens have been created since the 1960s, often passed in widely supported public lands packages. By contrast, a novel NCRA designation has no precedent, could require more education for legislators and the public, giving it a higher risk of stalling in gridlock. As Ben Katz of the Conservation Lands Foundation noted, a “novel designation takes a lot more education with the public and representatives.”¹⁰⁶ Despite the Mountain Accord process landing on the hybrid designation, its goals appear to be achievable under a well-constructed NRA.

¹⁰² U.S. DOI “*America’s Public Lands Explained.*”

¹⁰³ Ben Katz, CLF, video interview with the author, June 30, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Shaaron Netherton, FNW, phone interview with author, June 24, 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Shaaron Netherton interview, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Ben Katz interview, 2025.

The Mountain Accord and CWC processes have always emphasized broad consensus. Stakeholders, including ski resorts, local governments, conservation groups, and the public may be more comfortable supporting a familiar designation rather than a new, unfamiliar hybrid. Both Netherton and Katz underscored that coalition-building and management plans matter more than labels. By using an existing title with Wasatch-specific provisions, the CWC can honor the Accord's commitments and goals and potentially increase the likelihood of legislative passage.

A core challenge in the Wasatch is sustaining funding for restoration, visitor management, and recreation and transportation infrastructure. Paul Sever, manager of the King Range NCA, emphasized that designations bring visibility and prestige, which help secure grants, partnerships, and congressional appropriations.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, NRAs like Sawtooth and Santa Monica demonstrate how funding can be stabilized through a mix of special appropriations, fee collection, and nonprofit partnerships such as the Sawtooth Society and SAMO Fund. These lessons suggest that existing designation models likely provide the visibility and institutional support the Central Wasatch may need to secure funding and partnerships.

In considering the path forward, it is worth noting that Sawtooth and Santa Monica provide tested frameworks that deal with highly comparable challenges that the Central Wasatch is facing. Similarly, interviews with Sever, Netherton, and Katz confirm that political, financial, and management realities are central to any successful designation.¹⁰⁸ While the Mountain Accord committee created the NCRA designation name to reflect the Wasatch's unique values and challenges, both Netherton and Katz emphasized that titles matter far less than the substance of the legislation and the management plan that follows. What ultimately determines success is

¹⁰⁷ Paul Sever, BLM, 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Netherton and Katz interviews, 2025.

whether the enabling legislation and subsequent management plan effectively capture the distinctive mix of watershed protections, ski boundary freezes, fee reinvestment, adaptive management, and recreation access that the Central Wasatch needs.

The priority for the Central Wasatch is establishing a durable federal framework that codifies the Accord's commitments. As the Mountain Accord Final Report stressed, a federal designation was always intended to balance environmental protection with recreation in the Central Wasatch. Existing frameworks, such as NRA models, have demonstrated the capacity to incorporate provisions like ski boundary freezes, watershed protections, fee reinvestment, adaptive management, and recreation access. What ultimately matters most is that the enabling legislation and subsequent management plan capture these priorities in ways that are both politically feasible and durable. With a designation and management plan that reflect the goals of the Mountain Accord, the cherished landscape of the Central Wasatch can become a national example of collaborative stewardship for generations to come.

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