

Bill sets up new Mojave monuments

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MORONGO BASIN — A bill introduced by California Sen. Dianne Feinstein Monday proposes adding almost 3,000 to Joshua Tree National Park and placing Big Morongo Canyon Preserve in a newly created national monument.

The bill, entitled the California Desert Protection Act of 2010, won a long list of supporters, including Hi-Desert conservation organizations such as the Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, Mojave Desert Land Trust and SummerTree Institute.

But it also prompted Congressman Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, to issue a caution about the amount of land the bill would remove from development plans.

"We are early in the legislative process, and it will take time to assess the real impacts of this far-reaching lands bill," Lewis said in a statement released by his office.

"But I am extremely concerned that it locks up tens of thousands of acres that are not suitable for protection, and prevents other uses such as mining, energy development or military maneuvers that might better serve our national interests."

Reaction among off-highway vehicle interests also was mixed.

At the Johnson Valley OHV area, the bill strikes a compromise between the Department of Defense's consideration of the area for a Marine base expansion, and off-roaders' desire to keep the area devoted entirely to recreational use.

The bill gives part of the OHV area to exclusive military use and part to off-roading, while mapping out a third area to be shared between off-roaders and the Marines.

Over 1 million acres preserved

Feinstein's bill would create two new national monuments:

- The Sand to Snow National Monument would encompass 134,000 acres of land from Coachella Valley to the top of Mount San Gorgonio.

Two Morongo Basin preserves — Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and The Wildlands Conservancy's Pipes Canyon Preserve — would become part of the new monument, affording them extra protection.

The Mission Creek Preserve and Whitewater Canyon also would be inside the monument, along with the San Gorgonio Wilderness.

- The Mojave Trails National Monument would cover about 941,000 acres of federal land, about a quarter of them along Route 66.

The bill gives the Bureau of Land Management authority over the lands, allowing existing recreational uses such as hunting and vehicle travel to continue.

Feinstein's bill also adds adjacent lands to Joshua Tree and Death Valley national parks and the Mojave National Preserve.

The 2,900 acres added to Joshua Tree National Park come from small parcels of BLM land.

Energy projects scrutinized

The bill also addresses the multitude of plans for renewable-energy projects in the Mojave Desert, setting new deadlines for environmental studies and creating new federal offices to manage development.

Companies with projects on public lands would be required to give 25 percent of their revenue from new renewable-energy projects to the state and 25 percent to county governments, to help pay for permitting, public lands protection and local conservation efforts.

The new act would establish strict deadlines for developers to conduct required biological and cultural studies, ensure connection to the grid, and develop a plan for water.

"This would ensure that serious development proposals are moved to the front of the line — and help put an end to unfettered speculation on desert lands," an analysis from Feinstein's office states.

The Bureau of Land Management would be directed to establish offices specifically focused on renewable energy development in every state that has significant wind and solar resources on public land.

The offices would be funded from an existing permit improvement fund.