

Proposed national monuments seek to protect desert beauty

But some say the designation could hinder other efforts to promote green energy here

K KAUFMANN • THE DESERT SUN • DECEMBER 24, 2009

A bill that would create a new national monument stretching from Joshua Tree National Park to the top of Mount San Gorgonio could boost the Coachella Valley's profile as a destination for hikers, bird watchers and other outdoor enthusiasts — and the economy.

The California Desert Protection Act of 2010, introduced Monday by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., also is expected to spark controversy for effectively banning solar or other renewable energy development on 941,000 acres in the Mojave Desert, also to be made a national monument.

But this week, valley civic, business and environmental officials focused on the positive impacts of the proposed 134,000-acre Sand to Snow National Monument.

The new area would abut the western boundary of Joshua Tree National Park and include the Big Morongo and Whitewater canyons, the San Gorgonio Wilderness and 23.6 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail.

"We see ourselves as the Coachella Valley's gateway to (the park)," said Rick Daniels, city manager of Desert Hot Springs, which has already signed on in support of the bill. "We see that as an economic advantage. Folks going on day hikes (can) start in Desert Hot Springs, stay at our spas, eat in our restaurants, shop at our stores."

A national monument is similar to a national park but can be created by Congress or an order of the president without congressional approval. Monuments receive less funding and provide less wildlife protection than national parks.

Feinstein's bill also would designate the Whitewater River as a federally protected wild and scenic river, meaning the river would be kept free-flowing.

Another provision of the law would add 2,900 acres to Joshua Tree National Park, including key habitat for endangered desert species such as the desert tortoise and bighorn sheep, said Curt Sauer, superintendent of the park.

Sauer added that Joshua Tree is estimated to pump between \$40 million and \$60 million a year into communities within a 100-mile radius of the park.

The draw at Sand to Snow could be the proposed monument's range of ecosystems, said David Myers, executive director of the Wildlands



The sun rises over Joshua Tree National Park. A proposed national monument would abut the western boundary of Joshua Tree National Park and include the Big Morongo and Whitewater canyons, the San Gorgonio Wilderness and 23.6 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail. (Jay Calderon, The Desert Sun)

Two new monuments

Sen. Dianne Feinstein's new California Desert Protection Act would create two new national monuments, the Mojave Trails National Monument and the Sand to Snow National Monument, right on the Coachella Valley's doorstep. Supporters say Sand to Snow, one of the most biologically diverse areas in the nation, could become a prime destination for ecotourists, drawing thousands of visitors to the area.



CALIFORNIA DESERT PROTECTION ACT OF 2010

Other key provisions of the bill include:

Other national parks: Adds 30,000 acres to the Morongo Preserve and 41,000 acres to Death Valley National Park.

Off-road vehicle areas: Designates five existing off-road areas — a total of 314,000 acres as permanent off-road recreation areas. But permanent status for the Johnson Valley off-road area near the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms is on hold pending decisions about possible expansion at the base.

Renewable energy permit process: Would establish new approval deadlines and streamline the approval process for solar projects by giving first priority to companies that complete environmental and other required studies on schedule and secure power agreements with electric utilities.

New funding sources for solar development and

Conservancy, which also is supporting the bill.

"It's arguably the most biologically diverse national monument in America," Myers said. "It extends down to the Sonoran desert and up to alpine meadows in the San Geronio Wilderness."

Mark Graves, communications director at the Palm Springs Desert Resort Communities Convention and Visitors Authority, said the CVA already promotes Joshua Tree National Park as a tourist destination and sees Sand to Snow as a very marketable extension.

"We would literally be surrounded by national monuments," Graves said.

Karen Lowe, a real estate agent and president of the Morongo Valley Chamber of Commerce, added that the monument would be good for property values.

"People move here to not be in the city, to not have someone right next door to them," Lowe said. "We very much (want) to see Morongo Valley stay rural."

Effect on solar efforts

Others, however, raised concerns about potential impacts on recreation and the development of solar and wind energy on prime public land, such as the 941,000 acres in the Mojave Desert that Feinstein wants to protect.

That land would become the Mojave Trails National Monument, running along Route 66 and stretching from the Nevada border on the east to north of the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms.

Speaking in the Senate on Monday, Feinstein noted that the land had been bought largely with private funds and donated to the government specifically for conservation.

While several energy companies have proposed solar development in the area, no applications have been submitted, according to information on the California Energy Commission Web site.

The bill would have no impact on the solar plants in development on federal land east of Joshua Tree National Park, the area known as the Riverside East solar study zone.

To balance the land loss, Feinstein's bill would spur renewable energy development in other solar study zones by streamlining the approval process, similar to the fast-track schedule now being used to get Riverside East projects approved by December 2010.

And while solar plants would not be allowed in the Mojave Trails National Monument, transmission lines would.

Not good enough, said Palm Desert resident Colt Stewart, who sees the bill as an obstacle to renewable energy development at a time when the U.S. is striving to be less dependent on foreign oil.

"It's overkill on Sen. Feinstein's part," Stewart said. "The bill is

conservation:

Half of the income generated by solar projects on federal land would be used to improve the federal approval process and increase federal resources for land and water conservation. The other half would go to states and counties for similar purposes.

inconsistent with an energy independence position.”

Southern California Edison is on the list of the bill's supporters, saying it strikes a good balance between conservation and renewable energy development.

A statement from Edison on Tuesday said, “The bill provides clarity about this issue, and importantly, it ensures existing transmission corridors are not affected. That allows Southern California Edison continued access to renewable energy-rich locations.”

Michael Cipra, California desert program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., said the issue should not be an either- or.

“There is no conflict with this bill and renewable energy development,” Cipra said, “We can have both.”

Myers said preserving the land was important, not only for future generations, but right now.

“It gives people a sense of place, and these heroic landscapes like Sand to Snow are as much needed in our communities as schools and universities and churches,” he said. “They're really the backbone of the community.”

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