

Statement of Tom Fry
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Bureau of Land Management
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Forests and Public Lands Management
S. 2784, Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument
and
S. 2956, Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area
and the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness Act
September 13, 2000

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding S. 2784, the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Act, and S. 2956, the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area and the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness Act. Both of these areas, the Santa Rosas in southern California and the Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge area of western Colorado, are deserving of the recognition and the meaningful protections that are inherent in National Monument and National Conservation Area (NCA) designations. The Administration supports both of these bills.

The Administration has testified before Congress several times this year on special protective legislation for public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). While each NCA or BLM-managed National Monument is unique, there are certain common elements, and we have set a standard for what these special areas must include. Critical components of a Monument or NCA include: a land, mining, and mineral withdrawal; off-highway vehicle (OHV) use limitations; and language which charges the Secretary to allow "only such uses" as further the purposes for which the monument or NCA is established. In addition, we cannot consent to any language that represents a step backward from current management. I'd like to discuss with the subcommittee how each of these bills successfully addresses these important criteria and describe some of the important features of these very special places.

S. 2784, Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Act

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains, covering 272,000 acres in this Monument proposal, are areas of great contrast. Nowhere else can you find the juxtaposition of outstanding biological, scenic, cultural and recreation values bordering a rapidly growing population center and world-class resort destination. Much of the growth and prosperity of the Coachella Valley is a result of its proximity to these great natural areas and that growth is now the biggest threat to its preservation.

The unique combination of extraordinary natural values of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains adjacent to a growing urban complex has long been recognized as deserving special protection. In 1990, Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan designated the Santa Rosa Mountains as a National Scenic Area. A cooperative effort among the BLM, State and local governments, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, private organizations, and property owners, this administrative designation was the first step to protect the 194,000 acres. However, the current designation cannot provide the permanent protection necessary to ensure that future generations visiting the Santa Rosas will still be able to see a Golden Eagle soar over them, a Peninsular Ranges Bighorn Sheep clamber through them or a Desert Tortoise crawl across them. A National Monument designation can provide that insurance. Early in 1999 a local, grass-roots effort was initiated to seek support for just such a National Monument designation.

Responding to that call, Secretary Babbitt made the first of several visits in August 1999 to begin listening to the local community on how best to protect the area.

The resource values in this special area are as diverse as any area that the Federal government manages. The area is home to five distinct "life zones" from Sonoran Desert to Arctic Alpine resulting in an exceptionally diverse biological population. Over 500 species of plants and a suite of Federally-listed threatened and endangered species call the Santa Rosas home. Premier among these is the Federally-endangered Peninsular Ranges Bighorn Sheep whose population has plummeted so that today only about 300 remain. Desert oases, natural hot springs, and verdant riparian areas dot this landscape.

Likewise the cultural and archaeological resources of the region abound. A number of sites sacred to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, whose ancestors inhabited most of the area, are within the proposed monument. Networks of trails connect village sites, campsites and other areas of importance to the Tribe. The Tribe presently manages portions of the proposed Monument within its reservation boundaries and will continue to do so after the designation.

Recreational use of the Santa Rosas is, and should continue to be, an important use of the mountains. Hiking, biking, camping and horseback riding are all legitimate uses which should, and can, continue in a way compatible with meaningful protection of the region.

S. 2784 meets the important tests that we have set out for these special areas. First it contains a complete withdrawal from land laws, mineral leasing laws and the mining laws. This withdrawal, while protecting valid existing rights, assures us that these public lands will not be disposed of in the future, that they will not be pockmarked with mining claims and that no new oil and gas wells or sand and gravel pits will appear within the monument on public lands. As the Director of the multiple-use agency managing the majority of the public lands in the West, I believe that mineral production is an important use of BLM's public lands when it occurs in the right place and is done the right way. The protection of special areas, such as the Santa Rosas, is also an important part of BLM's multiple-use mandate as established by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. The legislation also includes new strong limitations on off-highway vehicle use within the Monument and states that the Secretary shall allow "only such uses" of the lands within the Monument as further the purposes for which it is created.

Senator Feinstein and Congresswoman Bono have both worked hard to see that the bill before us today is a good bill. Through long negotiations and extensive compromise on all sides, we have a bill we can support and will provide real protections for this very special area.

S. 2956, Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area and Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness Act

Located north and west of the growing city of Grand Junction in western Colorado, the Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge area covered by the legislation encompasses over 122,000 acres of magnificent lands, including over 75,000 acres that make up the Black Ridge Canyon Wilderness Study Area (WSA) that the bill would designate as wilderness. Each year, more than 100,000 visitors come to these public lands to bike the Kokopelli Trail, hike through and among the awe-inspiring sandstone arches of Rattlesnake Canyon, float the red rock canyons of the Colorado River, marvel at the dinosaur quarries and revel in the solitude of extraordinary wilderness.

Carved over millions of years by the Colorado River and its tributaries, this northern edge of the Colorado Plateau is home to a wide range of geological and other natural wonders. The evolution of life on earth can be read on the many canyon walls. From the Precambrian crystalline rocks predating the evolution of higher life forms at the bottom of the canyons, to Triassic sandstone attesting to the ancient desert that was once here, to the abundant dinosaur bones in the Jurassic strata, the geologic history is accessible to scientists and schoolchildren alike.

For over 100 years, paleontologists have appreciated the incredible resource this area presents. Dinosaur Hill, Fruita Paleontological Area, and the Mygatt-Moore Dinosaur Quarry have been, and continue to be, the source for significant finds. Brachiosaur, Apatosaur, Diplodocus, and Ceratosaur bones have all been recovered from these areas furthering our scientific knowledge. Today, while scientific recovery work continues, the BLM has created interpretive walks and provides information to allow access and understanding to nonscientists as well as scientists.

This is a landscape where scale is important. From the awesome 300-foot wide amphitheater carved in the side of Mee Canyon to sheer cliff walls and waterfalls in the bottom of many canyons, an individual is dwarfed by the sheer size of a myriad of geological formations. Natural arches are found throughout the area, but Rattlesnake Canyon has a wondrous concentration of huge arches and related alcove features.

The area also is a haven for an incredible range of fauna. Desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, antelope, mountain lions and smaller mammals inhabit the region along with peregrine falcons, eagles and other raptors. The Colorado River running through the proposed NCA is home to four species of endangered fish- the humpback chub, pike minnow, bonytail chub and razorback sucker. In addition, the riparian communities found along the Colorado River are a significant biological resource of great importance to many forms of wildlife.

Recreation, including hiking, floating and mountain biking, is a significant and appropriate use of the area. The Black Ridge Canyons wilderness area provides accessible opportunities for solitude and discovery for over 25,000 hikers annually. Twenty-five miles of the world-renown mountain-bike Kokopelli Trail traverses the NCA as it traces a 140-mile path from Grand Junction to Moab, Utah. The Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge area is one of stark beauty and tremendous natural assets- it deserves designation as a National Conservation Area.

S. 2956, which is identical to H.R. 4275 as passed by the House of Representatives, includes the important provisions that must be in an NCA. It includes the complete land, mineral and mining withdrawal, "only such uses" language and restrictions on off-highway vehicle use that we have established as critical elements. In addition, this bill designates over 75,000 acres, including just over 5,000 acres in Utah, as the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness, and it does so clearly consistent with the provisions of the Wilderness Act.

I would like to highlight briefly one provision of the bill that may seem unusual at first glance, but we can support it in the context of this legislation and in this particular conservation area. Under the bill the Colorado River, to the 100-year flood plain, will not be included within the NCA. While we would oppose such a provision in most cases, we can support it because of the specifics of the situation. As the Chairman and members of this Committee are well aware, water in the West is a highly-charged issue and none more so than water from the Colorado River. The Colorado River is a major source of water for the states of Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Arizona and California as well as for the northern states of the Republic of Mexico. In the context of this politically-charged climate, we believe that excluding the Colorado River from management under the Act represents a reasonable compromise.

This does not, however, mean removing management of these lands from the legislation and the important protections it provides. The legislation not only withdraws the public lands within the 100-year flood plain from the land laws, mining and mineral leasing laws, but it also makes clear that the Secretary shall manage recreation and other uses of these lands in the same manner as the lands within the NCA. It is only with these important provisions that we can support the legislation.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, these two bills, S. 2784 to create the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument and S. 2956 which establishes the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area and Black

Ridge Canyons Wilderness, are good bills. They provide important new protections to these special areas without diminishing current management. We support both of these bills and urge their speedy passage.