

CAMPAIGN FOR THE CALIFORNIA DESERT

Protecting Our Legacy, Strengthening Our Future

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What exactly is being proposed?

The California Desert Protection Act of 2011, introduced by Senator Dianne Feinstein, would ensure that public lands in the California desert that have special importance for water, wildlife and recreation are protected for our children and grandchildren. It would create two new national monuments that would protect recreation opportunities and ensure that people will always have a chance to experience iconic wildlife like bighorn sheep and golden eagles. It would also create new wilderness areas, protect important waterways like the Amargosa River and Deep Creek as Wild and Scenic Rivers and expand Joshua Tree and Death Valley National Parks and the Mojave National Preserve.

While conservation groups broadly support the bill, they do have some concerns that they hope can be addressed as the bill moves forward. The bill as it is currently written could allow new areas of the desert to be opened up to destructive Off Road Vehicles and the damage they cause the land. In addition, the bill would remove protection from lands currently designated as “Wilderness Study Areas” and allow future utility corridors to run through the new National Monuments.

Why is this important now?

The desert we all love is being squeezed by two of the fastest growing regions in the nation. If we do not act quickly, sensitive water resources, fragile wildlife habitat and popular recreation and historic trails could be lost forever to poorly planned development. While there is adequate room in the region for responsible development, we can all agree that some places are best left unchanged.

How will this impact the prospect of renewable energy projects in the area?

The good news is that there is adequate room in the region for responsible renewable energy development. According to California Energy Commission staff, approximately 128,000 acres of desert land are needed to meet California’s Renewable Portfolio Standard with solar thermal energy. There are approximately 351,000 acres in the Bureau of Land Management’s Solar Energy Zones alone and none of this acreage will be affected by the designation of the Mojave National Monument. Further there is substantial private property acreage on which these types of projects could be sited.

How did Senator Feinstein decide which areas to include?

Many of the areas that would receive additional conservation protection under her bill have been recognized by the federal agencies that manage them for their natural and recreational values. In fact, a significant amount of the land being protected was donated to the government for preservation purposes and this legislation will simply ensure this protection permanently. Additionally, Senator Feinstein collaborated with many different stakeholders to determine where there was the most common ground for conservation. These stakeholders include individuals and groups with interests ranging from recreation, economic development, habitat protection, and historical, Native American and cultural preservation.

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What are the benefits to wildlife?

This legislation would connect and protect important water resources and migration corridors for imperiled and iconic wildlife, like bighorn sheep, golden eagles, and the desert tortoise. Overall it makes habitat protection a higher priority for the lands protected.

What kind of uses will still be allowed?

The bill would enable important traditional activities to continue in various areas, including hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, rock climbing, horseback riding, mountain biking, wildflower viewing and rock and gem collecting. It would also protect historic trails and important cultural sites, including a key stretch of Route 66, allowing Americans to step back in time and experience the region's Native American, pioneer and twentieth century history first hand. The bill would also permanently allow Off Highway Vehicle use in many of the areas designated which is problematic for many conservation groups.

What will the economic impact be?

The California Desert Protection Act of 2011 would bring important economic benefits to local communities, by expanding opportunities for tourism and recreation. The California Desert is one of the top outdoor recreation locations in the continental United States and the area's national parks alone bring nearly three million visitors each year. (<http://bit.ly/3G3CgV>) It is estimated that outdoor recreationists spend more than \$230 million annually while visiting the California desert region. (<http://bit.ly/YF1UI>)

This legislation would also protect an important stretch of historic Route 66, which Smithsonian Magazine recently named as one of the 10 Must-See Endangered Cultural Treasures. And history shows that expanding national parks and wilderness areas draws new tourism dollars. Economists have estimated that a 10% increase in the size of a designated wilderness area brings, on average, an 8.9% increase in visitors.

Finally, the communities that surround the California desert already benefit significantly from the retirees and professionals who choose to live there in large part because of the scenic and recreation amenities. Conserving the desert's treasures and creating more access to world-class outdoor experiences will only make the region more attractive to people who have the flexibility to live and work where they choose.

How will this impact military activity in the area?

This bill will not impact military activity at Edwards Air Force Base, Fort Irwin Military Reservation, or Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base. Further, the bill specifically exempts the military from any restrictions on over-flights.

How much is it going to cost taxpayers?

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Since the land is already owned by the public and managed by the federal government, there will be no new costs associated with the designations of wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, national parks, and national monuments. Furthermore, there are no appropriations or earmarks associated with the legislation so there are no additional costs to taxpayers.

How will this impact public access?

Protecting public access is one of the main goals of the bill. It would enable important traditional activities to continue in various areas, including hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, rock climbing, horseback riding, mountain biking, , wildflower viewing and rock and gem collecting. It would also protect historic trails and important cultural sites, including a key stretch of Route 66, allowing Americans to step back in time and experience the region's Native American and pioneering history first hand.

How will this impact private property rights and water rights?

As a matter of law, wilderness and national monument status only applies to federal lands overseen by such agencies as the National Park Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Accordingly, no private property will be impacted by the bill. Senator Feinstein has approached all the individuals who own adjacent private lands and asked for their comments.

In addition, the bill does not affect existing water rights, nor are new water rights granted to federal agencies when wilderness areas are protected. This is also true of the two national monuments included in the bill. When a stream is protected as a wild and scenic river it is protected from dams. However, designation does not affect existing water rights.

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