

Testimony by Frazier Haney
Conservation Director, Mojave Desert Land Trust
Board Member, The Wildlands Conservancy
Regarding S. 414, the California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act
U.S. Senate Public Lands, Forests, Mining Subcommittee
October 8th, 2015

Good afternoon, Chairman Barrasso, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the S 414, the California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act, introduced in the Senate February 9th, 2015. My name is Frazier Haney, and I am Conservation Director for the Mojave Desert Land Trust, as well as a volunteer Board member for The Wildlands Conservancy.

Senate Bill 414 protects the values that people who live in and visit the California Desert love about the area. Our desert is a spectacular place, and only becomes more important as we study and understand it further. S 414 is the product of years of careful compromise between stakeholders, and enjoys wide support from environmentalists, businesses, elected officials, off-road groups, civic groups, and residents. Every effort has been made by the groups working on the bill to include those who have an interest in the areas the bill would affect and protect existing uses of the land. It includes protections for natural and cultural resources, tribal interests, military training interests, designations to maintain off-road vehicle trails and use areas, facilitates common sense land transfers, and helps us plan for renewable energy.

I strongly support permanent protection for the ecosystem, and the scientific, historical, scenic, archaeological resources the lands in this legislation contain.

National Monuments

The centerpiece of the bill is the creation of two National Monuments - Mojave Trails and Sand to Snow. The 965,000 acre Mojave Trails National Monument encompasses many layers of human history in the West, protecting spectacular country that constitutes the heart of the Mojave Desert. It includes the Creation Trail sacred to Mojave Desert and Colorado River Tribes, along with a number of important sites for different Tribes. The second transcontinental railroad was constructed through the area in 1881, and still operates along the same line today. The ghost towns along this stretch of the railroad still bear witness to the people who lived here during this time, with old structures, cemeteries, and artifacts scattered throughout the area. This rail corridor made a logical path to follow through this long dry stretch in the 1920's when Route 66 connected Chicago to Los Angeles, the first paved road to facilitate automobile travel across the United States. Made famous through songs and stories like John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, it has been dubbed "The Mother Road." It is on The World Monuments Fund's Watch List of endangered sites since 2008, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation included its motels on a list of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places" in 2007. Mojave Trails contains the longest intact stretch of Route 66 left in the United States. Mojave Trails also contains several camps and hundreds of square miles used by General Patton in World War 2 known as the Desert Training Center. Remnants of this military training operation are written on the landscape, from tank tracks to abandoned campsites and old airstrips.

More than a thousand miles of four wheel drive roads provide public access throughout the area for exploring, sight-seeing, rock-hounding, and isolated camping. Opportunities for hiking in places like

Bonanza Spring, the Cadiz Sand Dunes, and the Pisgah Lava Flow make Mojave Trails an outstanding outdoor recreation area. Mojave Trails contains at least 25 rare plant species, three of which are so newly discovered they haven't been named and catalogued. The proposed Monument encompasses bighorn sheep migration corridors, foraging and nesting ground for golden eagles, and connects three of the six desert tortoise recovery units in California.

The proposed Monument includes 196,000 acres of land acquired for conservation purposes. In 1999, the Catellus Development Corporation listed over 600,000 acres of former railroad land for sale in a "checkerboard" spread across National Parks, Wilderness areas, Critical Habitat, and public lands. These lands had been vetted by the minerals department of Santa Fe Pacific Railroad, and were found to have little or no economic mineral value. The Wildlands Conservancy donated \$45 million in privately raised funds to the U.S. Department of the Interior to acquire, restore, and protect these lands. Then Vice President Gore called these lands "some of the most pristine and scenic desert lands in the world" and stated "These stunning California Desert lands are being preserved for future generations through a true public - private partnership . . ." The Mojave Trails National Monument would ratify this protection.

Sand to Snow National Monument protects one of the most biologically diverse mountain ranges in the United States, and serves as a scenic backdrop for communities that are built around eco-tourism and a rural lifestyle. The Monument allows hundreds of thousands of people each year to get away from the nearby urban areas to enjoy camping in the mountains, picnicking near desert streams, and hiking to the highest point in Southern California, the 11,500 foot high Mount San Geronio. It contains 25 miles of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, as well as one of the premier location in the Southwestern United States for bird watching at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. At least 66 rare plant species are found in the proposed Monument, as well as a great number of rare or endangered birds, reptiles, and insects. Designation as a National Monument would bring increased coordination between various land management agencies. This area is blessed with a strong public-private partnership between the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, San Geronio Wilderness Association, Friends of the Big Morongo Preserve, and the Wildlands Conservancy. Thousands of volunteer hours and in-kind donations help agencies operate visitor facilities, education programs, and maintain trails. This collaboration helps ensure these well-used lands will be maintained and advocated for into the future.

Wilderness

S 414 would designate five new wilderness areas and add to existing wilderness on public lands under management by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The bill will also expand Death Valley National Park, Joshua Tree National Park, and the Mojave National Preserve. Altogether, the new desert protection bill would protect over 420,000 acres forever by designating them as wilderness or park additions. These designations will formalize designations for lands studied since 1980 for their wilderness quality. Additionally, the bill releases 126,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas from the Cady and Soda Mountains, releases intended to accommodate renewable energy development, allow for potential transmission needs and address local government wishes for WSA release. Generations to come will be able to experience the beautiful solitude of the California desert and link to past generations through these lands. Wildlife will be able to use corridors that have become increasingly important with climate change, and, rare and endangered plant and animal species will benefit by protecting their habitat.

National Off Road Vehicle Areas

This bill also designates five existing, administratively designated OHV areas in San Bernardino County, covering approximately 135,000 acres, as permanent off-highway vehicle recreation areas. These areas have long been managed by the Bureau of Land Management for this purpose; designation will secure these areas for open access areas for off-road vehicles, important to make sure this land use is secured from further loss of access or restriction. Land management would remain as it exists today, but the BLM would be given discretion whether to require a new site specific management plan, or simply modify its existing desert-wide management plan. Additionally, the Secretary of the Interior is required to conduct a study to determine what, if any, lands adjacent to these OHV recreation areas would be suitable for inclusion and authorizes the Department to do so.

Other designations

- Designate 18,610 acres of BLM land in Inyo County as the Alabama Hills National Scenic Area, preserving it for continued recreational use.
- Designate 77 miles of waterways as Wild and Scenic Rivers.
- Creates the Vinagre Wash Special Management Area to conserve land and protect existing land uses and public access.
- Creates the Black Lava Butte and Flat Top Mesa Area of Critical Environmental Concern in order to protect roughly 1,700 petroglyphs and other cultural and biological resources covering 6,500 acres of land near Joshua Tree National Park.
- Protects access to Tribes for cultural activities and creates a management plan for a sacred trail along the Colorado River.
- Add acreage to Death Valley National Park (39,000 acres), Joshua Tree National Park (4,500 acres) and the Mojave National Preserve (22,000 acres).
- Provide a balanced approach to renewable energy development through several provisions. For example, the bill:
 - encourages the development of new renewable energy in solar zones established by the federal government, avoiding conflicts over lands long intended for conservation;
 - requires the exchange of hundreds of thousands of acres of isolated state parcels currently surrounded by national parks and wilderness, providing the state with lands that could be used for renewable energy, recreation or conservation; and
 - allows for upgrades to transmission lines necessary to bring clean energy from new desert solar and wind farms to urban areas, while still protecting pristine landscapes.

Protects and Builds on Existing Uses

This legislation recognizes and builds on the existing economic drivers in the California Desert like tourism, military training, and energy development. An April 2015 National Park Service report shows that in 2014, the 3.2 million visitors to Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks and the Mojave National Preserve spent \$191 million in communities near the parks, which supported over 2,700 jobs. A July 2014 study by Headwaters Economics found that the economies of regions surrounding 17 national monuments, including the Santa Rosa-San Jacinto National Monument in Riverside County, experienced growth following a monument's designation. The study found "monument designations help communities to diversify economically while increasing quality of life and recreational opportunities that assist communities to become more attractive for new residents, businesses, and investment." The bill

was developed in close consultation with the Department of Defense and contains language specifically requested by the department to ensure they are able to meet all existing and future military training needs. The bill includes language allowing low-level military overflights, training activities adjacent to conservation areas, and Naval Special Warfare Tactical Training in Imperial County. Language contained in prior versions of the legislation addressing the training needs at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center and providing permanent protections for the Johnson Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area was enacted in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014. Existing commercial mines have been excluded from proposed conservation areas in the bill, and rock-hounding is an allowed use in the National Monuments and Scenic Areas. Other existing mineral claims are given specific protection.

The designations in this legislation don't conflict with energy development. Since 2008, the Department of the Interior, State of California, industry representatives, environmentalists and various other stakeholders have been involved in planning for renewable energy facilities in the California Desert. These efforts culminated in a Record of Decision for the Bureau of Land Management's Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement in October 2012. Current efforts are nearly complete for public lands under the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, expected to be complete in early 2016. Both the Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement and the Desert Renewable Energy Plan recognize the conservation values in S 414. Importantly, none of the areas proposed for conservation in S 414 conflict with areas proposed for energy development in the Solar PEIS or the DRECP.

The legislation Senator Feinstein has proposed is certainly unique and wide ranging. Rarely in the past would you find conservation and environmental groups join arms with energy companies and off-road recreation groups to advocate for the same legislation. But with its balanced approach to conservation, recreation and all the other important uses of our treasured public lands, this legislation offers what I hope is a new spirit of cooperation among stakeholders not only in the California desert, but across the country.

It is an honor to testify in support of the hard work many individuals and diverse organizations have done to find a solution for land use issues and conservation in the California Desert.

Thank you. This concludes my testimony and I would be happy to answer any questions.