

New wilderness proposals for Inyo

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Senator Barbara Boxer and Congressman Buck McKeon, co-sponsors of the Wild Heritage Act, aren't the only legislators who see the potential for additional wilderness in Inyo County, despite promises that the controversial wilderness designation would be the last requested within Inyo County.

Senator Dianne Feinstein is looking at several new wilderness designations in Southern Inyo that top officials are saying would hinder potential revenue sources, job opportunities and recreation in the area.

Feinstein's office received a request by the California Wilderness Coalition seeking several new wilderness designations in Southern California, five of which are proposed for Inyo County's Fifth District, including areas of Death Valley.

Feinstein's staffers brought the proposals before Fifth District Supervisor Richard Cervantes, earlier this month.

The five new wilderness proposals include the Great Falls Basin Wilderness located near Trona on the southeast side of China Lake Naval Weapons Station, the Malpais Mesa proposed wilderness addition on the west side of Death Valley National Park, the Slate Range proposed wilderness just west of the Great Falls Basin proposal, and two wilderness additions within Death Valley National Park, one of which includes the area around the Ubehebe Crater, but does not include the crater itself.

The board decided Tuesday to review the wilderness proposals and draft a response to Feinstein. First District Supervisor Linda Arcularius said she was grateful that Feinstein's staffers discussed the proposals with the board before drafting legislation.

"She has only been requested to do this, and she has not agreed to carry any legislation," which gives the county the opportunity to work with the legislators to be sure the county's needs are met before legislation is drafted.

Arcularius mentioned that the board did not have that opportunity with the Wild Heritage Act which aims to create the Eastern Sierra/ Northern San Gabriel Wilderness.

The board agreed to review the wilderness proposals and outline its concerns and send a response to Feinstein.

"Our first concern is that these proposals don't fit the definition of wilderness" as defined in the 1964 Wilderness Act, said Fourth District Supervisor Jim Bilyeu. "The second is mining," he said, adding that the areas described for the proposed wilderness are rich in mineral resources, have current mining claims on them and/or companies researching the possibility of opening mining claims.

Supervisor Cervantes brought up several concerns about mining in Inyo County and the negative effects the proposed wilderness could have on the industry. "This is about economic opportunities for Inyo County being locked up," he said.

The proposed Malpais Mesa wilderness area includes an area where Timberline Resources is conducting an exploratory survey in hopes of opening a mine in the area

“which would open up the potential for income for the county,” the Fifth District Supervisor said Tuesday.

There is also a study group conducting research in that same area in hopes of finding a location for a geothermal plant, Cervantes added.

If the wilderness designation is pushed through, the area would be off-limits to mining and industry of any kind, including a geothermal plant.

Cervantes called the latest onslaught of wilderness proposals a “nefarious plot” by environmentalists to outlaw mining in Inyo County’s mineral-rich areas.

Cervantes also mentioned that the Slate Range Wilderness Range near Panamint Valley is the site of the Briggs Mine and the Ratcliff mine.

He also said the Briggs Mine, which supports 120 jobs when it is operating, is completely out of sight of the public, and does not spoil the scenic desert views of Southern Inyo.

Cervantes said the same of the Great Basin proposed wilderness. “That particular area is a high mining area,” said Cervantes. He added that Feinstein’s staffers are also saying that the Great Falls Basin proposed wilderness area “would provide a buffer zone for the (China Lake) naval base. But everybody who’s been out there knows that you can’t wander onto the base without knowing about it, there are signs everywhere.”

“That buffer thing doesn’t hold water,” he added, and the other supervisors agreed.

Second District Supervisor Susan Cash noted that wilderness designations, according to the 1964 Wilderness Act, are not designed to provide “buffer” zones for military installations, but to protect “unchanged and unspoiled” areas. She also said many of the areas don’t fit the description of “unchanged and unspoiled.”

“This has nothing to do with protection, it has everything to do with numbers,” said Third District Supervisor Beverly Brown, noting that the Ubehebe Crater is an area she could see being protected as wilderness, but not the surrounding desert area that is being considered for the protection.

“My position is that I don’t support any additional wilderness designation unless it fits the 1960s definition,” which says the designated land must be “unspoiled,” Bilyeu said. Phone calls to Senator Feinstein’s office seeking comments on the proposed wilderness designations were not returned.