

**STATEMENT OF TOM FRY
(ACTING) DIRECTOR, BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
ON H.R. 15**

**OTAY MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS ACT OF 1999
BEFORE THE
HOUSE RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE
ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS**

February 4, 1999

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on H.R. 15, the Otay Mountain Wilderness Act of 1999. I want to commend the bill's sponsor, Congressman Brian Bilbray (R-CA) for introducing this legislation which recognizes the unique nature of the area by protecting its many outstanding and precious natural resources for generations to come.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) strongly supports H.R. 15. We also recognize and appreciate the Subcommittee's work last Congress which amended H.R. 3950, the Otay Mountain Wilderness bill, also introduced by Mr. Bilbray. Our only objection to H.R. 3950 was the Section 6(b) language on Border Enforcement, Drug Interdiction, and Wildland Fire Protection. The amended Section 6(b) language, which appears in H.R. 15, was requested by the Administration and is in keeping with the mandate and intent of the 1964 Wilderness Act. We thank Congressman Bilbray and the Subcommittee Members for addressing our unusual and important access needs in the area.

I also want to comment briefly on Secretary Babbitt's recent tour of Otay Mountain. While there, the Secretary met with many individuals and local officials committed to preserving the special resources of this area. He was very impressed, encouraged, persuaded and enlightened by the diverse group he traveled with including Representative Bob Filner, San Diego County representatives, the staffs to Senators Feinstein and Boxer, staff to Congressman Brian Bilbray, the San Diego Association of Governments, the California Biodiversity Council, the Sierra Club, the Endangered Habitat League, The Wilderness Society, the U.S. Border Patrol and BLM officials.

H.R.15 would designate 18,500 acres of the Otay Mountain area in eastern San Diego County, adjacent to the U.S.-Mexico International Border, as BLM wilderness. Otay Mountain is located in an extremely unique and diverse area of the country. The area is important to San Diego's ongoing habitat conservation initiatives which the Department strongly supports. BLM currently manages Otay Mountain to preserve and maintain its wilderness character and we strongly support its continued protection and the wilderness designation envisioned in H.R. 15.

I would like to provide a brief discussion of certain aspects of the area's history and resources to help new Subcommittee Members better understand the vast array of public land management issues in this scenic and ecologically diverse area. The Otay Mountain area has long been recognized by the public as a unique ecosystem. As early as 1962, the Secretary of the Interior

created the Otay Mountain National Cooperative Land and Wildlife Management Area. Management direction for the area has focused on conservation of the area's flora, fauna, ecologic, geologic, cultural and scenic values as well as the protection of its wilderness values. In the 1980's, BLM established the Western and Southern Otay Mountain WSAs and, with strong public support (including a 1982 resolution from the San Diego Board of Supervisors), ultimately recommended a large portion of the WSAs as wilderness.

In addition to its natural attributes, the area has opportunities for solitude, open space and primitive recreation, and possesses nationally significant biological values. These include stands of rare Tecate Cypress and 15-20 other sensitive vegetative species. The proposed wilderness also contains an Area of Critical Environmental Concern which was established by BLM with strong public support. In addition, the City of San Diego has identified the region as a "core reserve" in open-space planning, and the California Department of Fish and Game and local universities have had a long interest in studying and monitoring the area's flora and fauna. Wilderness designation would secure a unique ecosystem in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Unfortunately, the area has experienced extensive resource damage in the last few years as a result of undocumented immigrants attempting to cross through the region. In addition, an October 1996 wildfire inflicted considerable short-term damage. However, with close coordination and onsite work among the BLM, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the Border Patrol, the City, County, and other interests, a dramatic reduction in illegal traffic has occurred and the area appears to be restoring itself.

This concludes my statement and I would be glad to answer any questions.

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