

**Statement of
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Bureau of Land Management
Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
S. 2109, California Desert and Mountain Heritage Act
April 15, 2008**

Thank you for inviting me to testify on S. 2109, the California Desert and Mountain Heritage Act. The Department of the Interior supports S. 2109 as it applies to BLM and NPS designations but would like the opportunity to work with the subcommittee on a number of clarifications, including acreage and mapping adjustments. We defer to the Department of Agriculture on those designations on National Forest System lands.

The Department strongly supports Congressional efforts to resolve wilderness designations throughout the West, and we welcome this opportunity to further those efforts. Only Congress can determine whether to designate Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) as wilderness or release them for other multiple uses. We support the resolution of WSA issues and stand ready to work with Congress toward this goal.

S. 2109 designates wilderness throughout Riverside County, California on lands managed by the BLM, National Park Service (NPS) and Forest Service. It also expands the BLM and Forest Service-managed Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument (designated by Public Law 106-351) as well as designates a number of Wild and Scenic rivers under the management of the Forest Service.

S. 2109, as introduced, includes acreage numbers that do not match area descriptions or the maps provided to the sponsors by the Department. We are working with the sponsor and the subcommittee to make appropriate corrections. Our discussions of the bill in this testimony will reflect the updated acreage numbers.

Title I designates four new wilderness areas: Beauty Mountain and Pinto Mountains Wilderness to be managed by the BLM as well as Cahuilla Mountain and South Fork San Jacinto Wilderness to be managed by the Forest Service.

The proposed new Beauty Mountain Wilderness would cover over 15,000 acres of BLM-managed lands. It is one of the last undeveloped areas in the region; numerous outside groups recognize both its significance as open space and the important resource values of Beauty Mountain. We should note that the boundary for Beauty Mountain is arbitrarily set at the Riverside County line. The second new BLM wilderness area, Pinto Mountains wilderness, lies just to the north of the National Park Service's Joshua Tree National Park and wilderness. Much has changed in these areas during the last 15 years. In 1994, the California Desert Protection Act changed the management landscape in the entire California desert. That same year, much of the area was designated as critical habitat for the threatened desert tortoise. This area is important habitat for the desert bighorn sheep. Many inholdings have been acquired by the State, private

groups, or BLM that made this area more manageable and enhanced their wilderness characteristics. Far fewer mining claims exist in the area than were there 15 years ago. These areas are currently primarily non-motorized.

In addition, Title I expands six existing wilderness areas that were designated under Public Law 103-433 the California Desert Protection Act and earlier wilderness bills: Agua Tibia, Orocopia Mountains, Palen/McCoy, and Chuckwalla Mountains Wilderness managed by the BLM; Joshua Tree National Park Wilderness managed by NPS; and additions to the Santa Rosa Wilderness within Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument managed by both the BLM and the Forest Service. The expansions, which will improve manageability, protect important resource values and improve dispersed recreational opportunities, range from a mere 500-acre addition to the existing Agua Tibia Wilderness to a large 23,000-acre addition to the Palen/McCoy Wilderness. Other additions include 5,000 acres to the Orocopia Mountains Wilderness and 13,000 acres to the Chuckwalla Mountains Wilderness. These expanded wilderness designations are possible now because of acquisitions of land by the BLM and changes in on-the-ground conditions that have occurred since the original wilderness designations.

Within the boundary of Joshua Tree National Park, section 102(f) of S. 2109 designates 36,800 acres of land in non-contiguous parcels as wilderness. All of these lands are wilderness quality. Of these acres, about 8,400 acres were designated only as potential wilderness as part of the original wilderness designation for Joshua Tree National Park in 1976 (Public Law 94-567), because they were privately owned or used for non-wilderness purposes. The lands now are owned by the National Park Service and are appropriate for wilderness designation. Another 28,400 acres, owned by the National Park Service, are located in a roadless area west of the Cottonwood Entrance. A draft study conducted by the National Park Service supports wilderness designation for these lands.

Section 103 of S. 2109 designates as potential wilderness approximately 43,100 acres of land along the park's southwestern boundary. This area is physically inaccessible and has no available water source. As such, the park already is managing this area as wilderness. About one-third of the acreage is in private ownership, and the National Park Service has been working to acquire these lands with donated funds, on a willing-seller basis. While we recognize the Congress' authority to designate this area as potential wilderness, we would like to work with the sponsor and the subcommittee to further clarify some ambiguities in this section.

Finally, Title III of S. 2109 expands the boundary of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument by approximately 8,360 acres, designating 2,990 of those acres as wilderness inside the monument. Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument was originally designated by Public Law 106-351. Since then, the communities, agencies, and other interested members of the public in the Coachella Valley have strongly embraced the Monument and take great pride in their many achievements towards making the Monument a success story. The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Advisory Committee fully participated in the development of a management plan that is now in the implementation phase. We support this proposed expansion, which would enhance

manageability of the monument and expand protection of important habitat for the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep.

S. 2109 is a result of a multi-year process undertaken by the California Congressional delegation. This public process included engaging elected officials, interest groups, local communities, and the affected land managing agencies. We appreciate these efforts as we believe that local input and consensus-building are essential ingredients to successful wilderness bills. As this bill moves forward, we look forward to the opportunity to work with the Committee on the corrections and amendments discussed in this testimony and to ensure that the maps most accurately reflect the intended boundaries.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I will be happy to answer any questions.