

Calif. lawmakers seek national monument designations

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON – California lawmakers and advocacy groups are ramping up efforts to win national monument designation for four scenic vistas in the state, from vast stretches of the Mojave Desert to redwood stands along the Pacific Coast Highway to canyons and mountains near the state's famous wine country.

The designation typically takes lands already owned by the government and walls them off from new mining, roads and power lines. Recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking and horseback riding are commonly allowed, though each national monument has its own dos and don'ts.

Supporters of the proposed monuments in California are pursuing two paths. The first is through legislation. Many Republicans are wary, though. So, supporters are also placing greater emphasis on Plan B: Executive action from President Barack Obama. The narrowing window for that option is adding urgency to their efforts.

Presidents have the authority to designate new national monuments through the Antiquities Act, and Obama has approved 16 so far, including three more last week. California groups took notice.

"We think that's exciting, and we merit the same consideration in the near term," said Bob Schneider, senior policy director for Tuleyome, a conservation group that seeks to preserve 360,000 acres in northern California as a national monument.

The group has worked with Democratic Rep. Mike Thompson, who has filed bills in three consecutive congressional sessions calling for what would be named the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument. In December, he brought in Interior Secretary Sally Jewell for a tour and to hear from local residents.

“The majority party is not willing to participate in the debate,” Thompson said. “If the president is willing, I’m all for him protecting the land through an executive order.”

Many of the communities in Thompson’s district support his efforts. One local chamber of commerce projected that a national monument designation would generate an additional \$50 million in economic activity in the subsequent five years through increased visitors. But another local chamber has fretted that a national monument designation could impose additional requirements on already overburdened agencies with no guarantee of additional resources.

Any national monuments legislation moving through the House would likely have to go first through a subcommittee chaired by Republican Rep. Tom McClintock of California. He’s clearly skeptical.

“The Republicans want to preserve and enhance the public’s right to enjoy the public’s land. Democrats are seeking to further restrict public access,” McClintock said. “That’s the fundamental, core issue.”

Like Thompson, Sen. Dianne Feinstein also is getting restless. She first proposed legislation in 2009 calling for two new national monuments in the Mojave and Sonoran deserts and reintroduced a version of the bill in early February. Feinstein favors legislative action, but she said in an emailed statement that executive action may be necessary if the bill stalls.

Feinstein, a Democrat, said she would prefer the legislative

route because an executive order would simply create two new national monuments while her legislation includes more land for national parks, wilderness and off-highway recreation. Numerous compromises crafted over the years would be lost.

The Wildlands Conservancy helped the federal government acquire large segments of both proposed monuments in Feinstein's bill through donations of money and land. The group was delighted when Jewell visited the proposed Sand to Snow National Monument last year and a vehicle in her security detail had to stop to let a bighorn sheep cross the road.

"You can't beat that," said David Myers, the organization's executive director.

Interior Department spokeswoman Jessica Kershaw declined to directly answer whether Jewell has recommended that the president use his executive authority on any of the four California projects. But she said Jewell regularly briefs the president on her travels and has talked to him about "the local vision for conservation around the Berryessa Snow Mountain Region."

Kershaw also noted that the Obama administration has testified in favor of Feinstein's legislation back in 2010 and Thompson's legislation in 2013.

McClintock says an executive order creating any monuments in California would be "a complete overreach" by the president and an abuse of the Antiquities Act, which was designed to protect small archaeological sites from looting.

The newest and smallest of the proposed national monuments is in Silicon Valley's backyard, near Santa Cruz. The 5,800 acres were acquired by various foundations and donated to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management just last year.

At a public rally two weeks ago, nearly 1,500 people showed up, stunning organizers who called the event the launch of

their campaign, not the conclusion.

Bruce Babbitt, the former Interior secretary under President Bill Clinton, was the guest speaker.

“Half the town was there,” Babbitt said. “It seemed to me an excellent statement to President Obama of community support. Congress has a chance to act. If it doesn’t, all the more reason for President Obama to step in.”