

National monuments expanding in Calif., Nev.

By Josh Lederman, AP

Mammoth bones, prehistoric rock carvings and more than a million acres of wilderness will be protected as part of three new national monuments that President Obama is creating in California, Nevada and Texas.

The presidential move, announced by the White House early Friday, brings to 19 the number of monuments that Obama has created or expanded since taking office. Environmental advocates hailed the new monuments as bringing sorely needed protection to natural American treasures, even as Republicans in Congress were pursuing legislation to stop the president.

In Texas, Obama is creating a monument at Waco Mammoth, a relatively small site in central Texas where archaeologists have discovered remains of 24 Columbian Mammoths – the largest of the mammoth species – from more than 65,000 years ago, the White House said. Like other mammoths, the Columbian Mammoth is now extinct, but roamed freely in North America during the Pleistocene epoch, known colloquially as the ice age. The site marks the only spot in the U.S. where a nursery herd of mammoths has been discovered, and is also home to preserved remains of other ancient species including the saber-toothed cat, dwarf antelope and the western camel.

Nevada's Basin and Range, home to rare rock art from 4,000 years ago, will also become a national monument. The White House said more than 700,000 acres of public land will be protected in an untouched area of the Great Basin region. In addition to petroglyphs, the site also contains "City," an array of abstract sculptures that artist Michael Heizer has worked on for more than four decades. The project evokes

elements of Mesoamerican life, with ceremonial mounds interspersed with more modern architecture. Nevada Sen. Harry Reid, the Senate's top Democrat, has been pushing for years to protect the site and its surroundings.

Tourists and nature lovers in California will see more than 330,000 acres in Northern California set aside for a new monument at Berryessa Snow Mountain. The White House touted the area's rich biodiversity and Native American cultural sites, but the area is best known as a destination for hikers, campers, fishermen and hunters. Officials said designating the site as a monument would likely prompt increased visits to the area and drive economic growth in the coming years.

"I applaud the president, because his historic action will preserve this magnificent area for generations and boost the local economy," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

Some Republicans have complained for years that Obama has abused his authority to designate monuments. In anticipation of Obama's move, this week Nevada Rep. Crescent Hardy introduced an amendment to an Interior Department bill that would block Obama from creating monuments in areas where there's been local opposition. His amendment, which successfully made its way into the bill, lists counties in Nevada, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oregon and Utah as off-limits.

"Any decisions that restrict ranching, recreation or other types of land-use activities should have as much local input as possible," Hardy said, adding that the amendment was "about empowering local communities and local stakeholders most affected by monument designations."

Under the 1906 Antiquities Act, presidents have broad authority to designate historic or ecologically significant sites without congressional approval, protecting those areas from new development like mining, oil wells and grazing.

Obama has used that authority aggressively as he's worked to secure a legacy of protecting the environment and warding off the effects of climate change. Earlier this year, Obama designated new monuments in Hawaii, Illinois and Colorado, and last year he expanded the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument to cover 490,000 square miles, making it the largest marine preserve in the world.

California's Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument will be managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, the White House said. The National Park Service will run Waco Mammoth National Monument in Texas, with help from Baylor University and the city of Waco. In Nevada, Basin and Range National Monument will be managed by the Bureau of Land Management.