

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, CONCERNING S. 4227, A BILL TO AMEND THE CALIFORNIA DESERT PROTECTION ACT OF 1994 TO EXPAND THE BOUNDARY OF JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK.

MAY 15, 2024

Chairman King and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 4227, a bill to amend the California Desert Protection Act of 1994 to expand the boundary of Joshua Tree National Park.

The Department supports S. 4227 with amendments.

S. 4227 would modify the boundary of Joshua Tree National Park to include approximately 17,842 acres of land in the Eagle Mountains area, adjacent to the park.

In 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established Joshua Tree National Monument as a unit of the national park system. The Joshua Tree Wilderness was designated by Congress in 1976. The Monument was enlarged and redesignated as a national park in 1994 by the California Desert Protection Act. Because the park lies at the convergence of the Colorado Desert and the Mojave Desert ecosystems, the park is home to a fascinating diversity of desert plants and animals. Joshua Tree National Park preserves and protects the scenic, natural, and cultural resources representative of the Colorado and Mojave deserts' rich biological and geological diversity, cultural history, wilderness, recreation values, and outstanding opportunities for education and scientific study.

Joshua Tree National Park protects numerous archeological sites associated with the Pinto Culture, one of the earliest prehistoric cultures found in the California desert (7,000–10,000 years old). The park preserves sites and materials associated with at least four overlapping ethnographic native cultures—the Cahuilla, Serrano, Chemehuevi, and Mojave Indians. Other historic sites preserve information on the history of the processing of gold ore, cattle ranching, rustling, and homesteading of the southwestern deserts. The park is located within a three-hour drive of Southern California's urban population centers and over 3 million people per year visit the park.

In 2016, the National Park Service, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), conducted a study of the proposed expansion area, located in the Eagle Mountains, and found that the lands were suitable for inclusion in Joshua Tree National Park.

Much of the study area was part of Joshua Tree National Monument when the monument was designated in 1936. The presence of patented mining claims containing substantial deposits of iron ore led to the removal of this area for mineral extraction purposes in 1950. The federal

lands that were removed from the monument were transferred to the BLM for administration and a steel corporation operated the Eagle Mountain Mine in this area for several decades.

While some portions of the Eagle Mountain area have been disturbed as a result of mining operations, most of the lands within the proposed expansion area remain undeveloped and in federal ownership. The area contains resources and values fundamental to the established purpose of Joshua Tree National Park. These include desert tortoise and desert bighorn sheep habitat and other habitat types important for maintaining biological diversity and healthy ecosystem function; interconnectivity of California desert lands; wilderness values and accessibility; dark night skies; desert landforms; and recreational opportunities. Historic resources associated with the Eagle Mountain Mine and Townsite, the Colorado River Aqueduct, and General Patton's World War II Desert Training Center may provide opportunities to expand the rich history interpreted at Joshua Tree National Park.

The Department recommends amending S. 4227 to reference an updated legislative map and to require environmental site assessments to be conducted prior to the transfer of the land proposed for addition to Joshua Tree National Park, consistent with the recommendations of the 2016 study. This will allow the NPS to identify hazards and manage health and safety issues that could affect future public use. We would be pleased to work with the sponsor and Committee on a map and amendment language.

Chairman King, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.