

Cities, environmental groups fight for larger recreation area in Angeles forest

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Agenda Item XV WCCA 8/14/13

07/04/2013 SGV Tribune



People enjoy a hot day in the East Fork of the San Gabriel River on Wednesday. (Watchara Phomicinda / Staff Photographer)

Backers of a larger, more comprehensive National Recreation Area that would include most of the Angeles National Forest plus the San Gabriel River and the Puente-Chino Hills are asking 31 local cities to join their fight.

The San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments, which backed the larger plan in 2009, will host a workshop on July 30 at San Dimas City Hall to discuss the proposal to bring in the U.S. National Park Service to co-run the Angeles with the U.S. Forest Service and create a half-million-acre recreation area.

Such a sweeping proposal was rejected in April by the National Park Service, the Department of Interior and the U.S. Forest Service. At that time, the NPS's final report removed the Angeles from the boundary and shrunk the proposed NRA from a 581,500-acre area known as "Alternative D" to only about 50,000 acres along the foothills and in a narrow river corridor.

Supporters were shocked to learn that the final report only includes foothill lands from Pasadena to Claremont and the urban portions of the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo rivers, mostly concrete river channels. The recreation area would skip from Duarte to Pico Rivera and include the western portion of the Puente-Whittier Hills. Not only do members of the SGVCOG, local Congressional representatives Judy Chu and Adam Schiff, environmental groups and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors prefer Alternative D, but many of these same stakeholders are upset because the report said the San Gabriel Valley could not have its own NRA. Instead, it would be a "unit of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area."

Some speculate creating another urban NRA in Southern California would be too costly and re-invent the wheel. As to why the NPS took the forest -- more than 400,000 acres -- out of the boundary, that was done to avoid jurisdictional battles and bureaucratic overlap. "It might be confusing," said Martha Crusius, who worked on the study for the NPS.

However, John Fasana, Duarte Councilman and SGVCOG member, after a presentation last month by supporters of the larger NRA plan, said the National Park Service has made things worse.

"It is really confusing to have us in the San Gabriel Valley with the Santa Monica Mountains," he said.

Many in the SGVCOG said that was the first thing they want to see scrapped.

"Being part of the Santa Monica Mountains Recreation Area is a non-starter," said Denis Bertone, a member of SGVCOG and the Lower Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy board of directors. "And the cities have to have a clear voice in this governance. Nothing against Santa Monica ... they are great people. We just want to be in control of our own destiny."

The argument echoed throughout the San Gabriel Valley more than 10 years ago when the state conservancy was formed. At that time, Valley folks rejected a proposal to conjoin with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, saying the east side of Los Angeles County needed a stronger presence for obtaining environmental grant dollars. Without a doubt, the cities are fighting an uphill battle.

They must convince the Congress that the federal agencies are wrong and they are right. To do this, backers have brought out the heavy hitters, including Belinda Faustinos, the former chief of the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy and one of the strongest environmental voices in the region.

In a presentation to the SGVCOG, Faustinos made many references to the U.S. Forest Service's poor management of the Angeles. It is on holidays like today when thousands -- even hundreds of thousands -- go into the North, West and East forks of the San Gabriel River to party. Often, tons of trash, including dirty diapers and beer bottles, are left behind.

"This idea just didn't come out of the air," Faustinos told the SGVCOG.

"Issues were identified in our national forest... the images here say it all," she said, during a power-point showing throngs visiting the Angeles during summer holidays and weekends.

"We have a river heavily impacted in the mountains. There is a lack of signage and there's graffiti all over, plus archeological sites that need to be managed."

Faustinos said the larger NRA would bring National Park Service resources into the forest and foothills, including more interpretive rangers, better signs, more bathrooms and parking.

And without criticizing the NPS or the U.S. Department of Interior specifically, Faustinos said a larger NRA in the region would bring a NPS presence into eastern Los Angeles County. "Our national parks need to be relevant to all communities. We need a National Park corridor opportunity that could be of assistance to local cities. We want to take advantage of resource opportunities."

Daniel Rossman, chairman of the group San Gabriel Mountains Forever, told the SGVCOG that he's been working for five years to bring the NPS into the region, and that should include "the full mountain range, go down the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel rivers and the Puente-Chino Hills."

"The San Gabriel Mountains Forever is promoting the idea of having an independent unit. That is our goal. We expect to see that reinforced by the cities," Rossman said. He added, without the larger NRA established by Congress, local cities will continue to become "frustrated" with "getting to the right person on the phone from the Army Corps of Engineers or the U.S. Forest Service."

Still, Rossman and Faustinos were careful to set aside concerns of cities and water districts. They both said any new NRA would not take away a city's autonomy over land use and zoning. Also, the NPS would not use eminent domain to buy additional land, but only willing sellers.

For the last two weeks, Chu and members of San Gabriel Mountains Forever have met with water officials, fire officials, county public works engineers and environmental groups at the Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District headquarters in Monrovia. Chu also recently shared her ideas about having the larger NRA with business officials and members of local chambers of commerce.

Faustinos said she wanted to see areas around the two rivers and foothill cities near the Angeles receive more tourism dollars and new enterprises.

Others in SGVCOG wanted the NPS to give them a map of the NRA boundaries, especially those in the foothill communities. "It would be helpful to have maps out there. It is not real clear where it starts, where the housing elements end or it mimics the national forest line," Fasana said.

Chu said she will meet with more stakeholder groups before drafting legislation.

"She wants to hear directly from anybody in the public," said Daniel Lindner, a Chu spokesman. She hopes to have her own town hall meeting on the topic sometime in August, he said.