

Hundreds jam meeting on San Gabriel Mountains national monument proposal

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More than 600 supporters and opponents of President Barack Obama establishing a San Gabriel Mountains national monument jammed a hastily called town hall meeting in Baldwin Park on Tuesday that included high-ranking cabinet members who spoke on the proposal for the first time.

While U.S. Forest Service Chief Thomas Tidwell did not commit to the idea, he said his agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture were exploring new partnerships and finding new ways to bring additional funding and resources to the Angeles National Forest and the San Bernardino National Forest.

Many of those who spoke said the two forests — visited by 5.6 million people every year — are trash-strewn by an onslaught of visitors and an inadequate supply of rangers, rest rooms and interpretive programs.

Tidwell said that starting down the path of a national monument could lead to a momentous change in the management of the twin forests that are surrounded by 16 million residents.

“In five to 10 years from now, we can look back and say we took a chance and seized this moment to really make a difference,” he told the overflow audience inside the city’s Performing Arts Center, including about 200 who were standing outside the auditorium.

Local environmental groups, city groups, biologists and cultural experts joined Rep. Judy Chu, D-Pasadena, and Los Angeles County Supervisor-elect Hilda Solis of La Puente in calling on Obama to take action.

“I’ve had meetings with the White House. That is what resulted in this town hall,” Chu said during an interview after the meeting. “They (the Obama administration) are very, very open to this.”

Others in the crowd were not so favorable. Some who were interviewed feared their favorite recreational activities would be curtailed if the San Gabriels were a national monument.

Others forwarded emails that labeled it “a federal land grab” that would threaten the supply of fresh drinking water in mountain rivers and reservoirs. Actor/activist Randal Massaro forwarded an email from a group formed in opposition to a United Nations voluntary proposal for sustainable development called Agenda 21. The email, also forwarded to news outlets by a resident of San Dimas and others, said the area’s drinking water was “under attack” because it would place the federal government in control of water resources.

The San Gabriel Mountains are a source of drinking water for one-third of Los Angeles County residents, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Chu countered these argument by saying she spent a year working with water interests. They have signed on to her bill, HR 4858, which would create the San Gabriel National Recreation Area, a similar idea but one that is larger in scope because it would include the San Gabriel River and the Puente Hills.

“I have the hard-earned endorsement of the San Gabriel Valley Water Association. They would not take a proposal like this lightly. Water rights would be upheld,” she said. Chu’s bill specifically states an NRA in which the U.S. National Park Service would join with the U.S. Forest Service in managing the forests will have “no effect on water rights.” The various water agencies said they were satisfied nothing would change in regards to water pumping and storage of water in the mountain reservoirs under Chu’s bill.

The Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District and the San Gabriel Basin Water Quality Authority support the national monument proposal as well, said Bryan Urias, a member of both boards.

Chu, and Solis before her, spent more than 10 years gaining support for a national recreation area as a way to bolster resources to the most-used urban forests in the nation. Supporters say the NPS does a better job managing recreation, while the Forest Service would do fire suppression. Though only introduced in June, Chu changed tacks last week by asking for Obama’s help, saying her bill was going nowhere.

“It is something I know would take several years (to get passed),” she said after the meeting. “There haven’t been recreation areas passed by Congress. It is the House,” Chu said. “If the Senate became Republican it would be even harder.”

During Tuesday’s panel discussion held by the U.S. Forest Service, most of the experts supported the national monument. But San Bernardino County Supervisor Janice Rutherford said her board needed more time, even though the county would welcome additional resources in Cucamonga Canyon, an area overrun by trash and graffiti and the site of many rescues.

“There seems to be many questions from our perspective. We don’t understand the rush,” she said. Later, Rutherford told the audience that more resources would help San Bernardino County deal with crowds entering the forest near Rancho Cucamonga, but she added: “I haven’t heard any guarantees.”

Robert Bonnie, undersecretary for the USDA, gestured to Rutherford during his speech, saying the USDA would listen to her concerns.

However, he spoke positively about the possibility of a national monument, saying the designation “could provide a potential for greater resources.”

Asking the president to preserve natural and historic places through the Antiquities Act would be a first step toward establishing the entire national recreation area in Chu’s bill. A national monument can only include federal lands, Chu said. In this instance, it was surmised that would include about 600,000 acres of the San Gabriels, encompassing a large swath of the two forests from Castaic to Mt. Baldy.

So far, Obama has established 11 national monuments, the last one at the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument in south-central New Mexico in May. Sixteen presidents have named national monuments since the law was written in 1906.