



# Local Views

## Endangered desert

### Just-signed bill allows special interests to pave roads through national parks

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By HOWARD GROSS / Special To Press-Enterprise

This week, President Bush signed the Department of Interior appropriations bill, which provides funding for national parks and other public lands. But this legislation fails to take care of America's national parks in several ways, two of which have strong implications for the parks here in the Inland California desert.

First, the bill leaves the National Park Service critically under funded, endangering the national heritage our parks were created to protect and jeopardizing the safety and enjoyment of millions of park visitors. Second, the bill allows special interests and local governments to claim rights of way and pave roads through national parks and other protected places.

The failure of our elected officials to protect the national parks has immediate repercussions in California's desert parks.



AP photo

A Joshua Tree is silhouetted as the sun sets Jan. 24 through the scattered clouds off of Highway 14 near Mojave.

In the bill, Congress voted to increase national park funding by \$55 million in 2004 - an amount that doesn't keep up with mandatory pay raises and cost-of-living increases for overworked park staff. Already, our national parks operate with, on average, only two-thirds of the needed funding - a system-wide shortfall of more than \$600 million annually.

A business plan completed last year for Joshua Tree National Park revealed that the park receives 30 percent, or \$2.6 million, less than is necessary to adequately protect park resources and meet the needs of visitors. Estimates of annual funding shortfalls for Death Valley National Park and the Mojave National Preserve are \$6.2 million and \$2.5 million, respectively.

#### Funding fewer rangers

These funding shortfalls equate to fewer rangers for visitor education and protection of park resources from poaching and vandalism. The Park Service will continue to operate with a lack of scientists and managers to monitor park

treasures and devise management plans for their protection, for the enjoyment of current and future generations. And it means a continued lack of funding to properly maintain park infrastructure, such as buildings and trails, and to stabilize and protect irreplaceable historical structures.

Providing appropriate funding for our national parks is not only essential for protecting our national heritage, but also for sustaining the economies of the communities surrounding the parks. A new report by the National Parks Conservation Association reveals that visitors to California's 23 national parks - including Death Valley, Joshua Tree, and Mojave National Preserve - contributed nearly \$1.2 billion in 2001 to the state economy and generated 30,000 jobs.

These findings, based on the work of Michigan State University economist Daniel Stynes, underscore the economic importance of adequately investing in park protection and ensuring that visitors have a good experience.

### **More right of ways**

The Interior Appropriations bill also allows the use of taxpayer dollars to process right-of-ways through national parks, wilderness areas, and other protected public lands using a recent administration policy known as the "disclaimer rule" and an antiquated mining law, R.S. 2477.

This move runs contrary to the vast bipartisan support in an earlier version of the legislation designed to exempt protected areas from the rule. But instead, the Department of Interior is now free to grant states, counties and developers the right to pave roads in national parks and other protected areas without considering public opinion or the impacts on the environment.

As a result, San Bernardino County could acquire more than 2,300 miles of right-of-ways that it has claimed in Mojave National Preserve, many of which are located along wash bottoms, abandoned dirt roads, and cow paths.

If the county were to secure these right-of-ways and maintain them as roads, it would degrade wildlife habitat, fragment the world's largest Joshua tree forest, cause further spreading of exotic species, and lead to increased resource damage within the preserve. Is this really necessary? Already, the Mojave National Preserve has more than 230 miles of paved roads and another 2,200 miles of unpaved roads open for public use.

Congress and the administration need to fulfill their responsibility to our national heritage and do a better job of funding and protecting our parks. We cannot afford to fail our national parks again -there is just too much to lose.

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