



Local Views

SB County intrudes on wilderness

Road policy endangers Mojave National Preserve

07:46 AM PDT on Monday, June 21, 2004

By PAUL F. SMITH

The tourism and lodging industry in the high desert of San Bernardino County welcomes visitors from all over the world. They are particularly attracted to our national parks, including Joshua Tree National Park and the Mojave National Preserve.

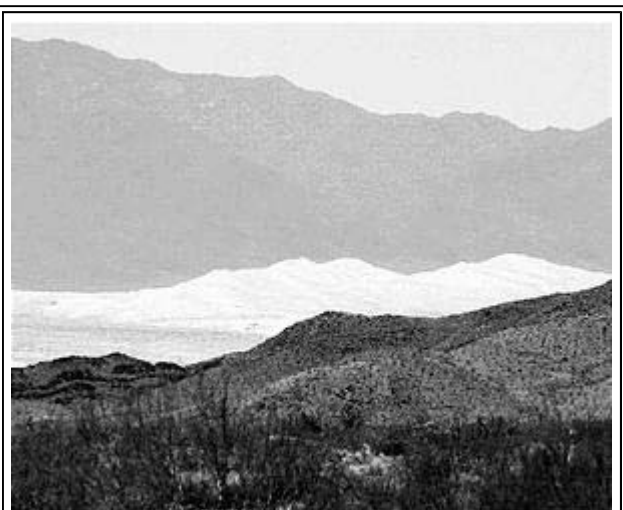
I recently toured these two world-famous parks and learned that San Bernardino County is irresponsibly using taxpayer dollars to undermine both the National Park Service's ability to protect the Mojave National Preserve and the health of the desert environment.

San Bernardino County argues that an obscure and outdated mining law from the frontier days, known as Revised Statute (RS) 2477, guarantees it ownership of more than 2,300 miles of roads, wash bottoms, jeep tracks and hiking trails in the Mojave National Preserve.

The county's policy is bad for taxpayers and the environment. Its claims could lead to new development and rampant off-road vehicle abuse in this unique national preserve. Moreover, its pursuit of RS 2477 claims is preventing some road improvements from going forward.

As long as the county maintains its RS 2477 claims on roads and trails in the Mojave Preserve, the National Park Service will not expend federal resources for road maintenance or improvement. Allowing the park service to handle those improvements would save county revenue for other transportation projects.

On our tour, we traveled Cedar Canyon Road, a scenic two-lane dirt route through about 35 miles of the Preserve. Since the county has taken over maintenance responsibility for this historic road, it has been expanded to four dirt lanes for no apparent reason. The adjoining terrain has been



AP photo

The Kelso Dunes shimmer against the backdrop of the Bristol Mountains in the Mojave National Preserve.

irrevocably sacrificed. Numerous other routes claimed by San Bernardino County were never maintained by the county and intrude into federal wilderness areas.

San Bernardino County need only look at Joshua Tree National Park and its surrounding communities to see the folly of its stance on RS 2477 claims. In Joshua Tree, where neither San Bernardino nor Riverside county has made road claims under RS 2477, the National Park Service's access to federal funds enables it to provide a higher level of road maintenance and support local construction companies and jobs.

San Bernardino County's Board of Supervisors will vote Tuesday on a "Vision Statement" for the county General Plan. Part of the county's vision includes "the recovery and maintenance of multi-use access to public lands . . . including national parks." This "recovery" appears to be an effort to take over ownership of abandoned routes in the Mojave National Preserve that cut across pristine desert wilderness.

If the county gets control over its RS 2477 claims, we could see huge increases in vehicular traffic in desert wilderness, damaging wildlife habitat, air quality, scenic vistas, and opportunities for natural quiet.

The Board of Supervisors should change its contentious stance toward the Mojave National Preserve and drop its ill-advised claims, not just for the sake of our many visitors but for those of us who enjoy living here. It is time for the county to stop wasting tax dollars and, instead, work with the Mojave National Preserve for long-term protection of our desert's stunning beauty and the tourism economy that depends on it. Paul F. Smith is president of the Morongo Basin Innkeepers Association, which represents hotels, motels, inns and bed and breakfasts in Twentynine Palms, Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley and Pioneertown.
