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Legislative Hearing on HR - 496

“Alabama Hills National Scenic Area Establishment Act”

Our story is of a grass roots organic process, to bring a National Scenic Area designation to a jaw-dropping, semi-primitive geological area sandwiched between the eastern crest of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the small, iconic western town of Lone Pine, CA.

The area is called the Alabama Hills; 19,000 acres of 90 million year old granitic rocks weathered by water and wind; tectonically fractured and aligned along nearly vertical joints in the rock creating large rounded, potato-shaped boulders and hundreds of natural stone arches like the famous “Mobius Arch” named after the Mobius strip (a banded circle that turns back on itself).

All of these naturally sculpted rocks sit at the base of the Sierra Nevada crest which looms over 14,000’ high and forms a dramatic backdrop to this incredible landscape!

Our organization is called the Alabama Hills Stewardship Group and in 2006 this group of local community leaders and volunteers, partnered with the Bureau of Land Management to help manage and influence decisions related to this area. The partnership evolved into a shared stewardship; and a passion for the land and how best to responsibly manage it. Together we work on interpretive and educational programs; visitor services and trail maintenance & restoration. We help lead guided interpretive hikes; have helped write motor touring and movie site guides; have provided input into a new general map and brochure, and help distribute “responsible use” educational materials like our famous “Don’t Crush the Brush” campaign designed to protect the fragile desert vegetation that dominates the ground cover.

All these efforts help educate and offset the impacts from the over 120,000 visitors we receive every year. That’s more visitation than other nearby and federally designated areas such as *Manzanar National Historic Site* and *Devils Postpile National Monument*.

Our stewardship group has been recognized for our outstanding work and partnership with the BLM: with a US Department of the Interior “Cooperative Conservation” award and also a “Vision Award” given to us by the Sierra Business Council.

A quick history of the Alabama Hills, which were first occupied for thousands of years by the Paiute Shoshone Indians...Then in the mid-1800s gold was discovered which attracted many new settlers to the area. During the Civil War miners sympathetic to the south named the area after a Confederate warship named the CSS Alabama. Mining continued until the 1940s when agriculture and ranching took over as the primary economic force in the Owens Valley. Around that time Hollywood discovered the cinema-graphically rich landscape and the storyline of the “Wild West” and so was born the ‘American Western’ film genre. The Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers and John Wayne all filmed here. Throughout the years, over 400 feature length films were shot in the Alabama’s including classics such as: “*Gunga Din*” and “*How the West Was Won*” and more recently “*Ironman*” and “*Django Unchained*”. This fantastic landscape is also used for Super Bowl commercials and television shows with the commercial filming industry pumping nearly 10 million dollars into the County economy each year! This legendary landscape has also attracted to the area, prominent photographers such as Ansel Adams and his contemporary counterpart David Muench.

So who visits the Alabama Hills? We have identified over 40 different user groups including hikers, families, motorists, campers, RV owners and ATV riders, mountain bikers, rock climbers, photographers, wildflower enthusiasts, horseback riders, fisherman and hunters and even permitted special events like the Lone Pine Film History Museum’s fundraiser “Concert in the Rocks”.. So the area is really all about shared use:

- **Wide variety of user groups***

- Climbers 24%
- Hikers 22%
- Motorists 22%
- Camp/Tent 8%
- Camp/RV 8%
- Photographer 6%
- OHV 5%
- Other 2%
- Mtn Biker 1%
- Equestrian 1%
- Tour 1%

*Based on 1500 contacts/observations November 2013 – March 2014

Now let's talk about our designation process that started over 6 years ago. For us it was always about the journey rather than the result. Our goal was to be respectful, collaborative and to avoid the controversy that has plagued other land use issues in the Owens Valley both past and present. Also since we didn't know - what we didn't know, we benchmarked both the designation process and legislation for other nearby areas such as the Santa Rosa – San Jacinto Mountains National Monument; Piedras Blancas ONA, Carrizo Plains NM and the Columbia River Gorge NSA.

Because the Alabama Hills has received significant exposure both state and nation-wide we wanted to maintain local control by being in charge of our own destiny; not being dictated to, by the federal government. A key goal of our process was to engage all stakeholders and user groups and let their input drive our process. We identified and reached out to over 30 stakeholder and 40 user groups. We had hundreds of conversations, dozens of meetings and presentations, and a final public forum where we reached an overwhelming consensus. We also received more than a dozen letters of endorsement from our key stakeholders (representing both conservation and access groups) including a unanimous 5 - 0 vote and the ringing endorsement of our Inyo County Board of Supervisors.

Our early decision to “go slow”...Listening first and acting last - lengthened our process to over 2 years; but resulted in a collaborative process where all input was valued and incorporated into our final recommendation.

We chose a '*National Scenic Area*' designation because it perfectly describes what this area encompasses. And because it was a lower level designation that perfectly balanced conservation with access; protecting both the natural resource as well as peoples' access to it... Or to quote John Muir "*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in...*"

On behalf of the Alabama Hills Stewardship Group, all our stakeholders and the thousands of people who interact with this amazing landscape every year; thank you for your due consideration in supporting our request to federally designate the Alabama Hills, a National Scenic Area.

Alabama Hills Designation Study Process

Key Headlines:

- The Alabama Hills Stewardship Group, Inc. (AHSG) is a local group of community leaders who have partnered with the Bureau of Land Management over the last 9 years to help direct the management of the Alabama Hills. The goal is to make the Alabama Hills as accessible and activity inclusive as possible, while still preserving its semi-primitive and scenic landscape. The AHSG received a “**Cooperative Conservation Award**” from the United States Department of the Interior for their community stewardship work in 2008.
- Over 27 months (2008/2010) an AHSG Designations Study Sub-Committee gathered input from over 30 stakeholder and 40 different user groups. Feedback was received from groups as diverse as the Inyo County Board of Supervisors to the Friends of the Inyo to local cattle ranchers. From rock climbers to ATV riders.
- This input helped direct the sub-committee’s charge to explore a federally legislated designation and led to a final recommendation to designate 18,000 acres of this scenic semi-primitive roaded area a **National Scenic Area** under the BLM’s National Landscape Conservation System. A designation will protect (through a congressional bill) both the spectacular landscape and the various user groups’ access to the Alabama Hills.
- A designation will allow improvements to be made to the **existing** infrastructure: roads, campgrounds, informational kiosks, etc.
 - As well as fund a comprehensive education effort for both the general public and local schools.
 - A designation will also help further protect sensitive Native American cultural sites and artifacts.
- The AHSG, Inc. is committed to protecting the jaw-dropping beauty of this semi-primitive landscape with continued access for hikers, motorists, photographers, rock climbers and campers as well as allowing important economic activities like commercial filming, cattle grazing, hunting/fishing and recreation to continue.
 - **Balancing all these needs** is what makes the Alabama Hills so special to so many people and necessitates its protection.

Sub-Committee Findings:

- Overwhelming majority of stakeholders and user groups support a designation that promotes area and protects their access and continued use.
 - Strong desire by local stakeholder/user groups to drive/lead the process locally before *'outside forces'* potentially dictate future of Alabama Hills.
- Under the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System a local designation team also has the ability to help draft federal legislation.
 - Other designations that were benchmarked, had legislative provisions that protected local interests such as grazing, motorized vehicle access, Native Indian cultural resources, county road infrastructure and wildlife research.

Key Steps in Process:

- Over 27 month period gathered input from over 30 stakeholder groups, dozens of user groups & hundreds of individuals. Input drove processes recommendations.
 - Referenced back to key stakeholders continuously during entire process...
 - Including 3 Inyo County BOS presentations.
- Held 5 public map input sessions over 3 months; a front page Inyo Register map and article requesting input; and an additional 5 months of posting the map, providing copies and comment cards in area Chambers of Commerce. Also had dozens of individual conversations with land/home owners in the area both large (LADWP) and small (individual home owners). That input led to our current boundary map and recommendation to include approximately 19,000 acres (of the available 30,000 managed by the BLM) in the designation.
- Distributed drafts of our proposed legislation to any interested party and have incorporated input into the document from key stakeholders such as LADWP, Lone Pine Paiute Shoshone Tribe; California Department of Fish and Game and the Inyo County's legal consul. Current draft includes all input received to date.
- Completed individual Inyo County Board of Supervisors tours of the Alabama Hills to answer questions directly and expose them to the incredible landscape and diversity of use.

Final Recommendation:

- Designation type and name recommendation to be the:
 - **Alabama Hills National Scenic Area**...A first-of-its-kind designation under the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System. This is a low-level federal designation allowing the continuation of **all current** activities and access/multi-use in addition to providing the legislative flexibility to accommodate the majority of our stakeholders' interests.
 - *Only exemption is the withdrawal of future mineral entry.*

Public Approval Process:

- Held key meetings presenting our final recommendations:
 - With Alabama Hills Stewardship Group (receiving their full endorsement)
 - Endorsement from Lone Pine & Bishop Chambers of Commerce
 - And Bishop City Council
- A '**Public Forum**' held in Lone Pine receiving overwhelming support for AHSG's recommendations
- Near unanimous support from the extensive list of stakeholder groups engaged
- Presented to Central California Resource Advisory Council receiving letter of support sent to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar
- **Broad coalition of support garnered during designation study process has deepened/strengthened over time.**
 - *Supporters anxious for legislation to be enacted.*
- Received final 4 – 1 vote of endorsement by Inyo County Board of Supervisors on November 9th, 2010 to support pursuing a federally legislated National Scenic Area designation for the Alabama Hills.

Additional Developments:

- AHSG received **Sierra Vision Award'** in 2011 from Sierra Business Council
- Featured articles in **Scenic 395** magazine; Eastern Sierra's 2013 **Philanthropy Guide** and front page of the **LA Times** April 30, 2013
- Incorporated AHSG, Inc. into a 501c3 non-profit in March of 2013
 - In August, 2014 expanded the BOD from 5 to 13 members
- Have held four annual "**Alabama Hills Day**" events supported by over 30 exhibitors/sponsors and hundreds of participants. BLM is co-sponsor.
- Provided input into DRECP process to exclude proposed NSA from renewable energy development.

- Will have ‘casual use’ mining claims within designation. Goal is to provide **“recreational prospecting”** experience for visitors in historic mining area.
- Lone Pine Tribe finalized **ancestral burial grounds land** transfer with INF/BLM
 - Plan to transfer final BIA property into NSA designation
- **Updated ‘new’ Inyo County BOS on process and legislation**
 - Received unanimous 5 – 0 Board of Supervisors vote on August 6, 2013
 - New support letter sent to the Senator Feinstein and Congressman Paul Cook
- Met with and toured area with BLM State Director Jim Kenna and staff; receiving his enthusiastic support for ongoing stewardship work and legislative proposal.
- Received numerous and positive local, state and national press articles in support of legislation.
- Met with Congressman Cook and staff (May – December 2013) receiving interest, support and ultimately House sponsorship for stand-alone legislation
 - Key stakeholder groups reviewed/approved final draft of House bill
 - House of Representatives bill introduced by Congressman Cook on Thursday, September 18th, 2014
 - While in House ‘Natural Resources’ Committee bill underwent legislative-language ‘enhancements’ with input from Conservation Lands Foundation; The Wilderness Society and local utility providers: LADWP and SC Edison
 - New final bill reintroduced into House of Representatives on 01/22/2015
- Comparable Senate bill finalized by Senator Dianne Feinstein and attached to her new California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act of 2015; with Senate introduction on February 9, 2015
 - New updated bill received unanimous endorsement from Inyo County Board of Supervisors on May 10th, 2015
- May 23, 2015 tour Alabama Hills with Congressman Cook, wife Jeannie & staff.
- Future steps: Once bill is passed and legislation enacted AHSG, Inc. will work with US Department of the Interior and BLM to coordinate with Inyo County, the Lone Pine Tribe and other key stakeholders on development of a management plan for the new **‘Alabama Hills National Scenic Area’**
- AHSG will help develop, implement, support and monitor the new plan

Business Case – National Scenic Area

The Alabama Hills Stewardship Group's 'Designation Study Sub-Committee' spent 18 months gathering input from 30 stakeholder and 40 user groups concerning the future of the Alabama Hills. After that input was received and a determination was made to pursue a designation vs **no** designation (which was one of the 7 options considered) we then spent approximately 9 months researching and debating the designation's boundary and the appropriate federal designation type to both meet our stakeholders needs and to properly define the Alabama Hills.

The designations we considered were:

- i. National Park
- ii. National Monument
- iii. National Recreation Area
- iv. National Conservation Area
- v. National Scenic Area
- vi. Outstanding Natural Area
- vii. No Designation

Stakeholder input was decisively directed toward a lower level designation to order to have a minimum of restrictions and regulations on the area and to allow all current commercial (filming, grazing, hunting/fishing) and recreational (hiking, climbing, motorized access, camping, etc.) activities to continue. We also benchmarked current designations that held these various titles to see if those areas had commonalities to the Alabama Hills. For example the Columbia River National Scenic Area was benchmarked because so many recreational activities take place there.

Also of paramount consideration, was to manage the area as **semi-primitive**, with minimal infrastructure, in order to preserve the dramatic scenic nature of the land.

Therefore the focus of a specific designation, precipitated into a discussion focused on an Outstanding Natural Area vs a National Scenic Area. After further stakeholder input and committee debate we arrived at a recommendation for a **National Scenic Area** based on the following criteria:

Definition of '**National**': *Related to or belonging to a nation or country, i.e. "National Hero"; "National Landmark"*

Definition of '**Scenic**': *Constituting or affording pleasing views of natural features...Having beautiful natural scenery*

National was a key descriptor of the area because it is both a national geologic treasure and nationally prominent historically. The area has significant national history implications from:

1. The Native American (Paiute – Shoshone Indian) inhabitation of the area for thousands of years and the culturally sensitive and significant Native American sites, artifacts, and history there.
2. A chapter of the California gold rush that played out in the historic gold mines of the Alabama Hills. Miners in the 1860's sympathetic to the south named the area after the CSS Alabama, a Confederate warship.
3. The spectacular 90 million year old granitic rock outcroppings - back dropped by the Sierra Nevada mountain crest - became the birthplace of the '**American Western**' film genre, with over 400 Hollywood films made here from "*The Lone Ranger*" and "*Hopalong Cassidy*" serials to "*How the West was Won*" and more recently "*Ironman*" feature length movies.

Scenic because of:

1. The incredible jaw-dropping viewscape that is formed by the wind and water erosion of unique potato shaped boulders and hundreds of natural arches that dominate the area. Over 120,000 visitors annually are drawn to this very unique and visually stunning landscape.
2. The play of light, wind, and geology against the dramatic backdrop of the Sierra Nevada's has attracted legendary landscape photographers like Ansel Adams and David Muench to the Alabama Hills; and led to hundreds of films, print ads and commercials, that capture this magical landscape for the viewer.
3. Spectacular spring wildflower blooms, which serve as a colorful contrast to the stark background of the desert and rocks.

Armed with these facts and rational, the Alabama Hills Stewardship Group's recommendation to pursue a National Scenic Area designation for the Alabama Hills has met with universal support from our broad coalition of stakeholders, who's resolve has deepened and strengthened over time, to see this designation come to fruition.

Stakeholders/Key Influencers:

BLM, Inyo County Board of Supervisors; Bishop City Council; LADWP; SC Edison; Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce; Bishop Chamber of Commerce; other county chambers, Coalition of Chambers; Inyo Associates; Advocates for Access to Public Lands (AAPL); Friends of the Inyo; The Wilderness Society, Conservation Lands Foundation, Sierra Club/Toiyabe Chapter; "Range of Light" Group; Eastern Sierra Audubon Society; ALOMR; Eastern Sierra Native Plant Society/Bristlecone Chapter; Eastern Sierra Interpretive Association; Central California Resource Advisory Committee; Sierra Business Council, federal legislators (Feinstein, Cook); media (local and national); Inyo County Sheriff's Department; scouting organizations; Inyo/Mono Cattleman's Association; mining claim owner/operators; citizen organizations; Owens Valley school system; Southern Inyo Heritage Trail and Park System; Lone Pine Economic Development Corporation (LPEDC); film industry/Inyo County Film Commissioner; Paiute/Shoshone Nation/Tribal Council; International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA); rock climbing organizations/guides (i.e. Southern California Mountaineers, Southern Sierra Climbers); Owens Valley School System; Inyo County Superintendent of Schools; horse packing industry; Lone Pine area business owners; Owens Valley business owners; private land owners; citizens of Inyo County ...

Uses/User Groups:

Hikers; rock climbers; horseback riders; photographers; hunters; fishermen; OHV four-wheel drive motorists; recreational vehicle owners; motorcycles; quad/ATV riders; mountain bikers; bird watchers/ornithologists; cattle grazing; sheep grazing; tent campers; RV campers; trail runners; artists/painters; native plant society; Native American subsistence/hunting/ceremonial rights; archeologists; geologists; rock hounds; recreational prospectors; ADA needs users; disabled sports; international tourists, general public (local and from outside area); filming industry; commercial enterprises: filming, grazing; hunting/fishing; special events: weddings; "Alabama Hills Day"; fundraisers "Concert in the Rocks"; volunteer organizations (trail repair, trash pickup); adjoining and imbedded land owners (private citizens/town of Lone Pine/mining claims/LADWP water monitoring stations/SC Edison power transmission lines; Inyo County roads, BLM personnel); bus tours; interpretive tours; bike tours; rock climbing classes; military use; aviation use (fixed wing planes, ultra-lights, paragliders, hot air balloons); firefighters/fire prevention measures; search and rescue training...

*Updated January 1, 2015