

**Statement of Ryan Henson, Senior Policy Director
California Wilderness Coalition (CalWild)
H.R. 857
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
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Thank you Chairman McClintock and Ranking Member Hanabusa for the opportunity to testify today on H.R. 857, the California Off-Road Recreation and Conservation Act. My name is Ryan Henson. I am the Senior Policy Director for the California Wilderness Coalition, or CalWild. I have worked for CalWild since 1994 and I reside in Shasta County, California.

CalWild works to protect, restore and promote the responsible use and enjoyment of the wildest remaining landscapes in the Golden State. Since 1976, CalWild has engaged with local stakeholders to develop widely-supported conservation proposals for millions of acres of public land.

CalWild strongly supports the conservation proposals included Congressman Paul Cook's H.R. 857, the California Off-Road Recreation and Conservation Act. The measure would:

- Protect over 322,000 acres as wilderness;
- Enlarge our desert national parks by over 39,000 acres;
- Protect the spectacular Alabama Hills as a National Scenic Area; and
- Designate 77 miles of stream as wild and scenic rivers.

The lands that would be conserved by the legislation offer spectacular wildflower blooms in spring, awe-inspiring sunsets and endless vistas. Their scenic values alone make them worthy of protection. But they provide so much more, including habitat for a long list of special status species such as the majestic desert bighorn sheep and the desert tortoise. Protecting these lands and streams will place them on the maps and allow even more people to visit and enjoy them, thus bringing much-needed tourist dollars to our desert communities.

We began working on what would eventually become H.R. 857 over a decade ago when former Congressman Jerry Lewis and Senator Dianne Feinstein directed off-highway vehicle (OHV) enthusiasts and wilderness advocates to work together if we wanted to see new public lands legislation for the California desert.

Many on all sides refused to meet with the supposed opposition, but we stayed at the table. We spent months working with OHV advocates, utility companies, tribes, local governments and a long list of other stakeholders to craft compromise proposals that were at least minimally acceptable to all involved. Difficult compromises included withdrawing protection from over

126,000 acres of wilderness study areas that would not be designated as wilderness. For many environmental groups, the most objectionable of these compromises are the OHV recreation areas and the OHV area expansion studies proposed in the legislation.

We nevertheless remain supportive of the bill, and we are not alone. Over the many years that Mr. Cook has worked to advance this legislation, it has been supported by the cities of Apple Valley, Banning, Calimesa, Cathedral City, Desert Hot Springs, Redlands, Santa Clarita, Vista and Yucaipa. It is also supported by the Death Valley, Joshua Tree, Morongo Valley and Greater Riverside chambers of commerce. Over 40 businesses support the measure, ranging from Edison International to the China Ranch Date Farm. This is an unprecedented level of locally-based support for a desert conservation bill. This groundswell is a direct result of intense outreach efforts over the past decade to ensure communities and stakeholders were informed and consulted about the balance and benefits of this legislation.

We would also like to draw the Committee's attention to H.R. 827, the Imperial Valley Conservation and Recreation Act that was introduced by Congressman Juan Vargas. That legislation and H.R. 857 were born from the same process of collaboration between stakeholders and tough compromise that started in the days of former Congressman Lewis. As a result, it too has strong support from OHV enthusiasts and some conservation organizations. We urge the Committee to offer H.R. 827 a hearing as well at your earliest possible opportunity.

We would like to close by thanking Congressman Cook for his efforts to move this legislation. He has been a strong champion for the bill and over the years he has protected the integrity of the local agreements struck between stakeholders. We hope to work with him, and the Committee, to help pass this important measure out of the House of Representatives at long last.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify here today.