

House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
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Written Testimony on H.R.2215 - San Gabriel Mountains Foothills and Rivers Protection Act
David Diaz

Good morning Chairman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and honorable committee members. My name is David Diaz, El Monte resident, El Monte Union High School District Board President, and Executive Director of Active San Gabriel Valley, an environmental justice and public health nonprofit organization focused on creating a more sustainable, equitable, and livable San Gabriel Valley. ActiveSGV has also been a member of Nature for All, a coalition of 12 organizations who have worked for over 8 years on federal protections for the San Gabriel Mountains and watershed.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of H.R. 2215, a bill supported by local community members, business and local electeds that would help ensure recreational access for park poor and pollution burdened communities, and protect our public lands, waters, and wildlife for today and for future generations. I'm here today to address issues that our families face in regards to accessing one of America's greatest assets; our public lands. Thankfully H.R. 2215 seeks to address some of these challenges.

I was born in Ensenada, Mexico but raised in the communities of El Monte and South El Monte California, where my parents worked multiple jobs to provide financial security and opportunity for our family. Nearly one third of children in these communities is considered obese¹ well above the national average of 18.5%². My childhood was no different. I was particularly attracted to public service and environmental justice because of my own experience growing up in a pollution burdened, concrete jungle. As a kid, I would characterize myself as obese, asthmatic, anxiety riddled, with limited upward mobility opportunities and a lack of access to spaces like the San Gabriel Mountains.

The lack of open spaces and access to public lands compounds problems too often associated with low-income communities. The cities of El Monte and South El Monte are described as top 5% disadvantaged communities in the State due to high levels of pollution, poverty, unemployment coupled with low percentage of educational attainment and park space for families³. The stress of growing up in poverty, compounded with an unhealthy built environment has created unprecedented levels of trauma and mental health issues for young people.

¹ <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/dvcouncil/minutes/2019/02/DataPresentation.pdf>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>

³ <https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen/report/calenviroscreen-30>

It wasn't until my adult years where a family health scare motivated me to lose more than 100 pounds through recreation and nutrition. Now, I've dedicated my career to improving the lives of my community. Inspired by my parents work ethic, I was the first to go to college and now hold a Master's of Public Health from Claremont College.

A growing body of research has found that greater exposure to nature is associated with better health and well-being⁴. As Executive Director of Active San Gabriel Valley we have led hundreds of families into the San Gabriel Mountains, via a free family friendly event, titled "The Bike Train" and organized multiple community hikes. These family friendly recreation events are coupled with education about the San Gabriel Mountains area, highlighting how they account for 30% of LA's water supply, 70% of LA's open space, and show families how to access this local treasure.

I'm proud of the work we're doing, but we cannot solve this problem alone. We need a partnership approach to engaging and educating communities, preserving open space and creating more access to parks and recreational opportunities. The San Gabriel Mountains Foothills and Protection Act would help ensure that over 17 million people that live within the region can have access to healthy recreation opportunities by preserving the last wild places of the San Gabriel Mountains with wilderness, wild river and National Monument designations and establish the San Gabriel National Recreation Area - a partnership park to catalyze collaboration among federal, state and local stakeholders.

Our families in the San Gabriel Valley are being suffocated by the impacts of poverty, absent nature, and the over burden of pollution, we need more opportunities to breathe clean air, recreate, and coexist with our families in nature.

I wholeheartedly believe this legislation will provide families with an opportunity to breathe clean air, recreate in nature, and create forever memories with their loved ones. Thank you again to Chairman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today to address this important bill that would increase recreational access, mental health and wellbeing for park poor and pollution burdened communities.

⁴ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/07/180706102842.htm>