

NPFPL Legislative Hearing

6/23/22

Testimony on H.R. 5355 Desert Community Lands Act

- Thank you, Chair Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher.

- I want to thank you for holding this hearing and allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of my bill H.R. 5355, the Desert Community Lands Act. I would also like to thank Mayor O’Gilvie of Twentynine Palms for being here with us today at this early of an hour. (CA time)

- H.R. 5355 is a bill to convey a total of approximately 8,200 surface acres of land owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to the Town of Apple Valley and Cities of Twentynine Palms, Barstow, and Victorville.

- In California’s 8th Congressional District, over 90 percent of our extensive land mass is owned by government agencies. As a result, many of our small communities face problems ranging from a lack of control over recreational opportunities to growing pains resulting from a lack of space, including housing, traffic congestion, insufficient wastewater treatment, and lagging development.

- Like many cities and towns in the California desert, the communities of Apple Valley, Barstow, Twentynine Palms, and Victorville are set amidst this extensive land ownership pattern dominated by the federal government. These communities are essentially landlocked by federal land, and suffer from a lack of local control in an age where the San Bernardino County population is exploding.
 - The Inland Empire is the region with the fifth fastest population growth among metro areas in the U.S. during the 12 months ending July 31, 2021
 - The U.S. Census Bureau showed San Bernardino County added more than 13,000 residents between April 1, 2020 and July 1, 2021, and nearly 160,000 from April 1, 2010.

- While in some cases federally managed lands provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, such as in our national parks and forests and off-highway vehicle use areas, they can also impede the surrounding communities from responding to the pressures of population growth and fostering economic development.

- My *Desert Community Lands Act* targets BLM land in and directly adjacent to growing rural communities in my district to restore local autonomy and control to these communities as they expand economically and geographically under the pressures of population growth.

- The lands conveyed under this act are essentially vacant lots. The conveyance would put these lands to use by preserving and expanding recreational opportunities, allowing for the development of critical infrastructure, and boosting the economy of these desert communities.

- Specifically, the *Desert Community Lands Act* would convey to Apple Valley approximately 4,630 acres of BLM-managed land located north and east of the town center. The lands conveyed would be managed by the town as the Apple Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area and would be used for off-road vehicles, competitive races, training and other recreation.
 - The lands being conveyed are already heavily used by off-road vehicles. Allowing the town to take over management will not only reduce the strain on the BLM and preserve a popular riding area, but also preserve surrounding habitat by designating riders an appropriate area to use.

- H.R. 5355 would also convey to Twentynine Palms approximately 80 acres located east of the city. The parcel is located adjacent to an area known as the 29 Palms Motorsports Arena, which annually hosts the Hilltoppers Motorcycle Club Grand Prix, which draws more than 1,200 racers and 5,000 attendees.
 - The conveyed land will allow for more publicly accessible race events, which will account for population growth and bring much-needed economic stimulus to the area.

- H.R. 5355 would also convey to Barstow approximately 320 acres of BLM-managed land located entirely within the incorporated city limits. This conveyance would contribute to improved vehicular circulation and reduced traffic congestion by allowing for secondary access to Barstow's key town center.
 - This parcel is also adjacent to the I-15 freeway and its commercial development is estimated to bring in as much as \$1,000,000 annually in sales tax revenue for Barstow, a significant economic boost to the city.

- Finally, H.R. 5355 would convey to Victorville approximately 3,200 acres located either within the city limits or its sphere of influence.
 - This conveyance would contribute to Victorville's master plan, which is designed to respond to projected population growth and serve as a transit hub between a planned high-speed passenger rail network connecting southern California communities to Las Vegas, Nevada. Other conveyed parcels would be used for wastewater treatment, increased transportation access, and light industrial development.

- Ultimately, local control is the foundation on which this nation was built, and it is critical that we maintain that tradition for our rural communities even while we work to preserve our natural lands.

- My *Desert Community Land Act* will give these communities the flexibility they need to support local population demands like housing, infrastructure, and economic opportunity (from grocery stores to tourism opportunities).

- Thank you again for your consideration of this bill and to Twentynine Palms Mayor O’Gilvie for your testimony today. I yield back.