



March 18, 2026

HR 5555 - “Monterey Bay National Heritage Study Act”

House Natural Resources Committee

Lavera Alexander, Chief Growth Officer – Monterey Bay Economic Partnership (MBEP)

Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of **HR 5555, the Monterey Bay National Heritage Study Act**. We are grateful to Congressman Jimmy Panetta for introducing this legislation and for his continued leadership on behalf of the Central Coast of California.

Monterey Bay Economic Partnership (MBEP) is a nonprofit, member-supported organization dedicated to improving the economic vitality and quality of life across the Central Coast. MBEP works with local governments, businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations throughout the Monterey Bay region to advance sustainable economic development.

We strongly support HR 5555, which authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study assessing the suitability and feasibility of designating Monterey Bay as a National Heritage Area. This study would specifically examine Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo counties.

The Monterey Bay region is nationally significant for its role in shaping California’s political history, its centuries-long maritime and cultural heritage, and its globally recognized coastal ecosystem. Monterey served as the capital of Spanish Alta California beginning in 1770 and later became the site where delegates crafted California’s first constitution in 1849, laying the foundation for the state’s admission to the Union. Today, the region’s cultural landscapes, historic resources, and natural environments collectively tell a uniquely American story that reflects Indigenous heritage, global trade, immigration, industry, and environmental stewardship. The story of Monterey Bay spans more than 10,000 years, beginning with the Rumsen Ohlone, Esselen, and Salinan peoples, whose communities developed cultural and



ecological relationships with the land and sea. Their traditions and stewardship remain an essential part of the region's identity and cultural landscape.

Over the centuries, Monterey evolved into a center of cultural exchange and international trade. Following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1822, Monterey became California's principal port of entry, welcoming ships and merchants from around the world. The region became home to diverse immigrant communities, including Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and Portuguese families, who helped build the region's fishing and maritime industries that continue to define the Monterey Peninsula today.

By the early twentieth century, Monterey was known as the "Sardine Capital of the World," with Cannery Row serving as the center of a thriving fishing economy. This era of industrial and maritime heritage was famously captured in the writings of John Steinbeck, whose novel *Cannery Row* chronicled the lives and communities that defined the region during this period. Although the sardine industry declined in the mid-twentieth century, the Monterey Bay region once again adapted and evolved, becoming a global leader in marine research, conservation, and coastal tourism.

In the decades that followed, the regional economy diversified in ways that continue to shape Monterey Bay today. The Salinas Valley emerged as one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Often referred to as the "Salad Bowl of the World," the valley supplies over 60% of the nation's lettuce, as well as spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, and strawberries. Today, agriculture is the backbone of the regional economy, generating approximately \$9 billion annually and supporting thousands of jobs across farming, food processing, logistics, and agricultural technology. With more than 1.4 million acres of farmland across the valley, the region plays a vital role in the nation's food system and directly contributes to national food security.

At the same time, Monterey Bay's extraordinary natural beauty and cultural heritage have made it one of the most recognized coastal destinations in the United States, and the region's dramatic coastline and scenic landscapes attract millions of visitors each year. Iconic destinations like the 17-Mile Drive, which winds along the Pacific coastline between Pacific Grove and Carmel-by-the-Sea, and the cliffs and redwood forests of Big Sur have inspired generations of artists, writers, and travelers. Big Sur in particular has long served as a cultural retreat for notable figures like Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller, and it continues to symbolize the natural beauty of California's Central Coast. Other destinations like Pinnacles National Park promote outdoor recreation and tourism.



Known for its 23-million-year-old volcanic rock formations, talus caves, and habitat for the endangered California condor, Pinnacles – similar to our coastline – offers visitors a unique opportunity to experience geological and ecological features that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

The Monterey Peninsula is also internationally recognized as a premier destination for recreation and cultural events. Pebble Beach Golf links is consistently ranked as one of the most iconic golf courses in the world, and along with the historic Del Monte Golf Course attracts visitors from around the globe and hosts major tournaments like the annual AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am. Additionally, Monterey Car Week has grown into one of the world’s most prestigious automotive events. Originating in the 1950s, the week-long series of car shows, historic races, and auctions now draws over 100,000 visitors annually and generates hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity.

Today, the Monterey Bay region also serves as a center for scientific research, technological innovation, and environmental stewardship. The region is home to globally recognized marine research institutions, advanced agricultural technology development, and emerging industries like advanced air mobility and unmanned aircraft system research and development. These industries reflect a continued tradition of innovation that builds on the region’s historic relationship with the ocean, agriculture, and natural environment.

The natural environment of Monterey Bay is equally remarkable. Often referred to as the “Serengeti of the Sea”, the Monterey Bay ecosystem supports extraordinary biodiversity, including dozens of species of marine mammals, hundreds of species of seabirds and shorebirds, and hundreds of fish species. The region’s dramatic coastline, unique underwater canyon, and productive marine ecosystem make it an internationally recognized center for marine science and environmental conservation.

The broader study area also reflects the diversity of California’s Central Coast and surrounding regions. To the south, San Luis Obispo County represents a natural extension of the landscapes, agricultural traditions, and coastal heritage that define the Monterey Bay region. Known for its dramatic coastline and productive agricultural lands, San Luis Obispo County shares many of the same environmental and cultural characteristics found throughout the Central Coast. These characteristics contribute to the broader regional story of communities shaped by the Pacific Ocean, fertile lands, and a long tradition of stewardship of natural resources.



To the north, Santa Clara County, home to Silicon Valley, represents a striking yet complementary dimension to the regional story and one of the world's most influential centers of technological innovation and entrepreneurship. This globally recognized technology ecosystem's close proximity to the Monterey Bay region highlights the dynamic relationship between California's historic coastal landscapes and its modern innovation economy.

Together, these natural landscapes, cultural traditions, and economic industries form a connected story of California's Central Coast that links Indigenous heritage, maritime history, immigration, conservation, and innovation. Across the Monterey Peninsula and surrounding communities, this history is reflected in a network of historic and cultural landmarks, including Cannery Row, Old Fisherman's Wharf, the Point Pinos Lighthouse, the Royal Presidio Chapel, and the Path of History: a network of over 50 historic landmarks that interpret the region's central role in California's development. These interconnected resources illustrate why the Monterey Bay region represents a uniquely American landscape worthy of study for potential designation as a National Heritage Area.

HR 5555 would provide an opportunity to evaluate how a National Heritage Area framework could strengthen the region's ability to connect its cultural, economic, and natural resources and uplift the narrative of these five counties' shared histories. By linking these places and stories together, the region could more effectively share its history with the millions of visitors who come to Monterey Bay each year.

The NHA model is also built on collaboration. Across the county, heritage areas have demonstrated how partnerships between federal agencies, state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and community groups can expand opportunities to preserve historic and cultural resources while supporting local economies. A feasibility study would help identify how these types of public-private partnerships could be developed and strengthened throughout the Monterey Bay region.

In addition to strengthening partnerships, National Heritage Areas help communities leverage existing resources. Through collaboration with the National Park Service, regions gain access to technical expertise, planning support, and new opportunities to coordinate conservation and education efforts across jurisdictions.



The study would also provide an opportunity to examine how heritage designation could support the long-term conservation of the landscapes and seascapes that define the Monterey Bay region. Protecting these natural resources not only preserves the region's environmental character but also contributes to healthier ecosystems, improved air and water quality, resilient coastal communities, and a strong economic ecosystem.

The Monterey Bay region is well positioned to undertake the work necessary to successfully conduct a National Heritage Area study and coordinate the long-term stewardship of heritage resources.

The Monterey Bay Economic Partnership (MBEP) is a regional nonprofit organization dedicated to improving economic vitality and quality of life across California's Central Coast. MBEP serves as a regional convener, bringing together local governments, businesses, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and community stakeholders to address shared economic and community development priorities. Through this work, MBEP has developed a strong network of partnerships throughout the Monterey Bay region that would support the collaboration required for a National Heritage Area study.

MBEP has coordinated regional initiatives that require multi-jurisdictional cooperation and engagement with federal, state, and local partners. Efforts like **Uplift Central Coast**, a six-county partnership that has secured \$19 million in Catalyst funding to guide economic development, **Regions Rise Together**, a convening of over 35 organizations identifying shovel ready projects, and securing the federal **Economic Development District** designation all included convening stakeholders across industries and communities, facilitating regional planning processes, and supporting initiatives that strengthen the region's economic resilience.

The organization also maintains strong working relationships with educational institutions and research organizations across the region, including colleges and universities that contribute to research, workforce development, and cultural preservation. Additionally, MBEP collaborates with community-based organizations and advocacy groups that are deeply engaged in preserving the cultural and environmental heritage of the Monterey Bay region.



Importantly, the Monterey Bay region already contains many of the elements that define successful National Heritage Areas. The region's historic sites, cultural landscapes, agricultural lands, scenic byways, and protected natural areas collectively form a network of resources that tell a shared regional story. These resources are stewarded by a diverse range of organizations spanning local governments, nonprofits, and conservation organizations, that are actively engaged in preservation and public education.

The feasibility study authorized by HR 5555 would provide an opportunity to formally assess these assets and determine whether National Heritage Area designation is the appropriate framework to help connect these resources at a national scale. The Monterey Bay Economic Partnership (MBEP) is ready to support this process by convening regional stakeholders and facilitating the collaboration necessary to conduct this study. It will use existing partnerships and regional leadership to ensure that the study reflects the perspectives of local communities and stakeholders across the Monterey Bay region. For these reasons, the Monterey Bay region possesses the cultural resources and the collaborative capacity necessary to evaluate National Heritage Area designation through the study authorized in HR 5555.

The Monterey Bay region holds an exceptional place in the history, culture, and environmental legacy of California and the United States. Authorizing this study will allow the National Park Service, Congress, and regional stakeholders to carefully assess whether National Heritage Area designation is the appropriate tool to preserve these nationally significant resources.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge the Committee to support HR 5555, the Monterey Bay National Heritage Study Act.

Thank you for the opportunity.