



**STAFF REPORT**  
**10/25/2023**

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council Members

**FROM:** Gabriel Perez, Development Services Director

**SUBJECT:** Adopt Resolution No. 2023-66 to Support the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument and expansion of Joshua Tree National Park.

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**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends that the City Council

1. Adopt Resolution No. 2023-66 in support of the establishment of the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument and expansion of Joshua Tree National Park and urging that the monument provide meaningful and direct access from the City of Coachella.

**BACKGROUND:**

A coalition of local non-profits and other organizations (The Protect California Deserts Campaign) is working to gain the support of U.S. Congressman Raul Ruiz, M.D., Senators Butler and Padilla, and the Biden Administration on a proposal to conserve federal public lands in Riverside and Imperial Counties for present and future generations to enjoy. The proposal would designate a new Chuckwalla National Monument that would border the southern edge of Joshua Tree National Park and permanently protect recreational access to popular places like the Mecca Hills and Orocopia Mountains. The proposed protections would honor and recognize the cultural histories of Indigenous peoples, enhance access to world-class nature for local residents and visitors, protect fragile desert wildlife by providing connectivity between existing protected lands, and help boost local economies.

National monuments can be established in two ways: through federal legislation or, more commonly, through presidential use of the Antiquities Act. Given current gridlock in Congress, the coalition is pursuing the latter option and seeks to work closely with Congressman Ruiz and California senators to advocate with the Biden Administration. Staff is recommending that the City Council approve a resolution supporting the designation of the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument and expansion of Joshua Tree National Park, and directing staff to forward the resolution to President Biden, Representative Ruiz, Senator Feinstein, and Senator Padilla.

## **DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS:**

The proposal would protect special deserts, mountains, and woodlands spanning from the eastern Coachella Valley almost to the Colorado River (see attached map). The new monument would safeguard World War II historical sites, the Bradshaw Trail and other designated routes, cultural landscapes, and vital habitats for a diverse array of species, including chuckwalla, desert bighorn sheep, and desert tortoise. The proposal also includes an expansion to Joshua Tree National Park. To highlight key elements, the proposal would:

- Establish a Chuckwalla National Monument stretching from the Mecca Hills and Dos Palmas in the west to approximately 10 miles west of the Arizona border in Riverside and Imperial Counties; this would include protection for a wide array of cultural, historic and natural resources
- Expand Joshua Tree National Park in the Eagle Mountain area;
- Require an inter-agency study of recreation needs on public lands in the region; especially under-resourced but popular day-use sites;
- Honor the homelands of the Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, Mojave, Quechan, and Serrano peoples;

The proposed Chuckwalla National Monument and other protections would only apply to federal public lands. Such a designation would not affect existing lawful use of private property. Rights of way, utility corridors and infrastructure would not be impacted. The proposed Joshua Tree National Park expansion includes only those lands identified in a 2016 assessment by the National Park Service for inclusion in the Park. The expansion would cover only Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in the area, not privately-owned lands. It also would not affect a proposed pump storage project and other existing or proposed activities on private lands.

The proposed protection of public lands is compatible with and complimentary to both the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (CVMSHCP) and the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP).

It's important to note that the draft Chuckwalla National Monument boundary does not exactly match the CVMSHCP conservation area boundaries. While the goals of the proposed national monument and the CVMSHCP are compatible, some variation is expected. The previously designated national monuments in the region which overlap with the CVMSHCP, the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument and the Sand to Snow National Monument, provide opportunities for ongoing collaboration and cooperative management. Like other national monuments in the region, the national monument designation would ultimately involve development of a management plan for the public lands with significant collaboration with local, state, and federal partners and input from the public.

The proposal was also crafted to be complimentary to the goals of the DRECP. All areas prioritized for renewable energy development were purposefully excluded from the proposed national monument boundaries.

National Monuments generally permit existing recreational uses to continue and in fact provide a better experience for users with increased signage for improved access and interpretation. OHV use is permissible within national monuments on legal routes and within designated areas.

The draft proposal will benefit Riverside and Imperial Counties in several ways, including:

- Protecting crucial plant and wildlife habitat and migration corridors.
- Safeguarding indigenous sites, landscapes of importance, and other significant cultural resources.
- Protecting important historic sites and landscapes.
- Enhancing equitable and sustainable recreation access to federal public lands.
- Boosting local economies by attracting visitors (see attachment on economic benefits)
- Promoting tourism and recreation which are an essential part of the desert region's economy.

The National Monument designation would preserve and enhance the extensive recreational and environmental education opportunities in this spectacular landscape. Monument designation would attract outdoor recreation enthusiasts, translating into dollars for the local economies of the Coachella Valley, Palo Verde Valley and surrounding communities.

### **Monument Access from City of Coachella**

All the lands within this proposal are within the new 25th Congressional District, which is represented by Congressman Ruiz. The coalition of organizations supporting the Protect California Deserts proposal is currently reaching out to local elected officials, community leaders and stakeholders to solicit their input and support. Local supporters include Friends of the Desert Mountains, California Audubon, Cactus to Clouds, COFEM, the Sierra Club, Mojave Desert Land Trust, Native American Land Conservancy, Wildlands Conservancy, and National Parks Conservation Association among several others.

The map of the Monument as proposed today would be outside the current boundaries of the City of Coachella, but within the Coachella General Plan Planning Area which is a boundary where the City has planned for future growth. The Monument proposal would be consistent with the City's General Plan goals which include:

- *Sustainability and Natural Environment Element Policy 13.13* which calls for the creation of nature access and working with County Tribal Governments and other recreation and open space districts to create desert preserves with hiking trails, nature observing areas and picnic areas.
- *Sustainability and Natural Environment Element Policy 13.16* encourages parks and trails to be designed to conserve scenic and natural features and encourage public awareness of Coachella's unique geography.

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monuments are within the boundaries of the cities of La Quinta, Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage, Indians Wells, Cathedral City and Palm Springs and offer recreational opportunities for visitors including hiking and camping. Many of these cities boast their locations as destinations to access these recreational opportunities, which also include increased economic benefits. The City of Coachella currently has no authorized nature trails within the City and is unable to offer this benefit to residents and visitors. Much of the land within the Planning Area east of the existing Coachella boundary is owned by the Coachella Valley

Conservation Commission or the Bureau of Land Management and would remain in conservation (Attachment 2).

Staff recommends the City Council support the Protect California Deserts proposal and the designation of the Chuckwalla National Monument with the added request that proposal include meaningful and direct access be provided to the Monument from the boundaries of the City of Coachella. Direct and meaningful access may require an expansion of the proposed boundary, which could be provided from the approved La Entrada Specific Plan development.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

The fiscal impact of the proposed monuments would be positive if the City were to have direct access to the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument from the City Boundary. Many Coachella Valley cities publicize access to these natural amenities from their cities to drive tourism which result in increased revenues for local businesses and hotels. The economic benefits of the proposal are included as Attachment 4.

**ALTERNATIVES:**

- 1) Adopt Resolution No. 2023-66 support of the establishment of the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument and expansion of Joshua Tree National Park and urging that the monument provide meaningful and direct access from the City of Coachella.
- 2) Deny of Resolution No. 2023-66.
- 3) Continue this item and provide staff with direction.

**RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE(S):**

Staff recommends Alternative #1 as noted above.

Attachment:

1. Resolution No. 2023-66, Support of Chuckwalla National Monument and Expansion of Joshua Tree National Park
2. Map of Proposed Chuckwalla National Monument
3. Summary of the Protect California Deserts proposal
4. A factsheet on economic benefits of the proposal