



Senator Feinstein Warns Against Proposed Revisions to National Park Service Management Policies

- Revisions would weaken protections against air pollution, noise, and harm to wilderness areas awaiting official designation -

February 23, 2006

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) is concerned that proposed revisions to National Park Service Management policies could seriously weaken protections currently enjoyed by our nation’s national parks.

In a letter to National Park Service Director Fran Mainella, Senator Feinstein expressed concern that these revisions would harm the air quality, pristine quietness, and interim protection for wilderness areas awaiting official designation.

“Our national parks are America’s cathedrals,” Senator Feinstein wrote. **“I am seriously concerned that your proposed revisions to the National Park Service Management policies will erode the protections that make our parks such remarkable places.”**

Senator Feinstein wrote that revisions to the policies would severely impact:

- Air Quality – Proposed revisions would include demoting “clear skies” from an essential component of the parks to an “associated characteristic,” appearing to allow for some accommodation of air pollution. Air quality is a critical problem for Joshua Tree, Yosemite, and Sequoia-Kings Canyon, where between 2000 and 2004 there were more than 315 unhealthy ozone pollution days.
- Wilderness Stewardship – Proposed revisions would weaken interim protection for lands deemed suitable for wilderness designation, but not yet recommended to Congress by the President, which could take years.
- Noise Pollution – Proposed revisions would remove important language about preserving, within the parks, the natural quiet of areas undisturbed by human-caused sound.

The following is the text of the letter sent by Senator Feinstein to Director Mainella:

February 16, 2006

The Honorable Fran Mainella
Director, National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240-0001

Dear Director Mainella:

Our national parks are America's cathedrals. Their pristine air quality, the quiet of their rugged beauty, and the wild character of their land are just a few of their extraordinary qualities. I am seriously concerned that your proposed revisions to the National Park Service Management policies will erode the protections that make our parks such remarkable places.

One area of particular concern is park air quality. Proposed changes to the management policies include demoting "clear skies" from an essential component of the parks to an "associated characteristic". The definition of "natural condition" has also been altered to include man-made impacts. These changes appear to allow for some accommodation of air pollution.

Air quality is a critical problem for several California parks, including Joshua Tree, Yosemite, and Sequoia-Kings Canyon. For example, from 2000-2004, there were more than 315 unhealthy ozone pollution days in Sequoia-Kings Canyon, and the Environmental Protection Agency formally designated these parks as ozone non-attainment areas. Most pollution affecting National Parks comes from sources outside park boundaries, and park officials must retain oversight over, and the authority to object against, permits for major air pollution sources.

Another area of concern is wilderness stewardship. The proposed changes to the park management policies weaken the obligation of the National Park Service to inventory its lands to determine those that have wilderness character. Among the lands likely affected by this change is Redwood National Park.

The proposed revisions would also weaken interim protection for lands deemed suitable for wilderness designation, but not yet recommended to Congress by the President. The President's review can take years, and protection during this interim period is important to preserve the wilderness character of these lands.

A final area of concern involves the natural quiet of the landscape. The proposed revisions would remove important language about preserving, within the parks, still areas undisturbed by human-caused sound. Encroaching noise from off-road, recreational vehicles and motor traffic may all impact visitor enjoyment. Airports have been proposed in the vicinity of several California parks, including Joshua Tree and Mojave, and noise from airplanes can also disturb natural quiet.

Noise may be especially problematic for parks in rapidly-growing areas like Joshua Tree, or in heavily-visited parks like Yosemite. Quiet contemplation of pristine environments is, for many people, an integral part of the experience of visiting National Parks, and the National Park Service's policies should be geared toward minimizing noise.

In the past, National Park Service Management Policies have been revised only once every ten years or more. Yet the most recent revision of these policies was completed in 2001. I am unclear why new revisions of the policies are needed now, or why many of the proposed changes are considered necessary to enhance the Park Service's ability to fulfill its mission.

To ensure that revisions are only accepted after careful consideration and with adequate public involvement, I respectfully request that any proposal you put together as a result of this public comment period be subject to another comment period of 90 days.

Sincerely,

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator