

# CITY OF PALM DESERT STAFF REPORT

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MEETING DATE: May 9, 2024

PREPARED BY: Anthony J. Mejia, City Clerk  
Katie Barrows, Protect California Deserts Coalition

REQUEST: RESOLUTION OF SUPPORT FOR THE PROPOSED CHUCKWALLA NATIONAL MONUMENT, INCLUDING EXPANSION OF JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK

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## **RECOMMENDATION:**

Adopt a Resolution entitled “A RESOLUTION OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA, IN SUPPORT OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PROPOSED CHUCKWALLA NATIONAL MONUMENT AND EXPANSION OF JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK VIA AN ADJACENT NATIONAL MONUMENT.”

## **BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS:**

All the lands included in this proposal are within the new 25<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, which is represented by Raul Ruiz, M.D. On September 25, 2023, Congressman Ruiz held a press conference to announce his support for the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument and expansion of Joshua Tree National Park. The press conference was attended by a large coalition of local organizations, tribal leaders, youth, and state and local officials. On September 21, 2023, Congressman Ruiz introduced H.R. 5660, the *Chuckwalla National Monument Establishment and Joshua Tree National Park Expansion Act of 2023*, a bill to “provide for the protection of natural and cultural resources, Tribal collaborative management, sustainable economic development, enhanced recreation, and equitable access on Federal lands in eastern Imperial and Riverside counties, California, and for other purposes.” On April 16, 2024, U.S. Senators Alex Padilla and Laphonza Butler joined Congressman Ruiz to announce bicameral legislation (H.R. 8031, S. 4132) to create the Chuckwalla National Monument and expand Joshua Tree National Park. ([House Bill](#), [Senate Bill](#)). They also urged President Biden to use his authority granted by the Antiquities Act to establish the Chuckwalla National Monument as well as expand Joshua Tree National Park by approximately 17,915 acres to be managed by the National Park Service. National Parks can only be technically expanded via legislation, but the Antiquities Act could be used to create a ‘de facto’ expansion. Congress could decide in the future to come back and make the formal addition.

A coalition of local non-profits and other organizations (the Protect California Deserts Campaign) is working with Congressman Ruiz, and Senators Padilla and Butler to gain the support of 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. The City Council is requested to consider 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, Representative Calvert, Senator Butler, and Senator Padilla.

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 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 complementary 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 complementary to the goals of the DRECP. All areas prioritized for renewable energy development were purposefully excluded from the proposed national monument boundaries. The proposal reflects input from various partners including the renewable energy industry, utilities, water districts, and others to ensure that the proposed monument does not conflict with infrastructure and renewal energy development. Adjustments to the proposed national monument boundaries have been made to address these concerns.

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.

The coalition of organizations supporting the Protect California Deserts proposal continues to reach out to local elected officials, tribes, community leaders, recreation groups, the agricultural community, and stakeholders to solicit their input and support. Local supporters include Alianza Coachella Valley, CactusToCloud Institute, California Audubon, Council of Mexican Federations in North America (COFEM), Desert Trails Coalition, Friends of the Desert Mountains, Imperial Irrigation District, Mojave Desert Land Trust, National Parks Conservation Association, Native American Land Conservancy, Sierra Club, Wildlands Conservancy, and Visit Greater Palm Springs JPA, among numerous others. Cities and agencies in the region are being asked to consider a resolution or letter of support. Cathedral City, Desert Hot Springs, Banning, Indian Wells, Indio, and Palm Springs have recently adopted resolutions or letters of support. Other supporters and more information are available at <https://protectchuckwalla.org/>.

**Legal Review:**

This report has been reviewed by the City Attorney's office.

**FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

There is no financial impact associated with adoption of the proposed resolution.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Draft Resolution
2. Map of Proposed Chuckwalla National Monument and Joshua Tree National Park Expansion
3. Chuckwalla National Monument – Proposal Summary
4. Economic Benefits of Conservation Lands
5. Padilla, Butler, Ruiz introduce legislation and call on Biden to establish Chuckwalla National Monument - Press Release (4/16/24)
6. Letter to President Biden and Secretary Haaland to use AA to designate Chuckwalla National Monument (4/16/24) - signed by Padilla, Butler, Ruiz + 23 Members of Congress