

# Protect California Deserts Proposed Chuckwalla National Monument Summary

Prepared for: Coachella Valley Water District  
March 2023



## Some Facts about the Proposed Chuckwalla National Monument:

1. The intent of the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument (CNM) is protection of natural, cultural, recreational, and historical resources.
2. There is no intent or interest to interfere with any water infrastructure or the mitigation/restoration activities of CVWD. We recognize the importance of these facilities and projects to the future of the region.
3. Language which the coalition will advocate for in the proposed proclamation would provide protection for CVWD interests and is now standard and demonstrably accepted by the current administration.
4. In response to concerns identified by CVWD, regarding potential effects of a national monument designation on maintenance, improvements, and expansion of facilities and infrastructure, the Protect California Deserts (PCD) coalition is willing to address these issues with revisions to the boundary that we have been working on collaboratively with CVWD staff. This good faith offer was a difficult decision for the coalition as maintenance and expansion of these facilities is permissible within a national monument as evidenced by proclamation language for other national monuments.

Language would be included in the presidential proclamation to identify that nothing in the Proclamation would interfere with existing water resources, flood control, and utility facilities. Language would also address future facilities. Other national monuments (such as Sand to Snow and San Gabriel Mountains in Southern California) have used similar language to ensure infrastructure and public facilities are not impacted.

Here is a very recent example, a proclamation signed by President Biden on March 21, 2023 designating Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Nevada, which includes the following language:

*"Nothing in this proclamation shall be construed to preclude the renewal or assignment of, or interfere with the operation, maintenance, replacement, modification, upgrade, or access to, existing flood control, utility, pipeline, and telecommunications facilities; roads or highway corridors; seismic monitoring facilities; or other water infrastructure, including wildlife water developments or water district facilities, within or adjacent to an existing authorization boundary. Existing flood control, utility, pipeline, telecommunications, and seismic monitoring facilities, and other water infrastructure, including wildlife water developments or water district facilities, may be expanded, and new facilities of such kind may be constructed, to the extent consistent with the proper care and management of the objects identified above and subject to the Secretary's authorities and other applicable law."*

5. National Monument status could help obtain additional funding for programs and projects and enhanced management of resources. BLM lands designated as national monuments receive preference for federal grants/funding that are available for research, restoration, facilities, and programs, compared to BLM lands with lesser protection status.

## **What is the purpose of national monuments?**

National monuments are designated to safeguard federal lands with cultural, historic, ecological, and scientific values. A national monument designation is much more flexible and very different from a national park or wilderness designation, and is unique to each individual landscape.

## **What lands are affected by a national monument designation?**

The national monument designation applies only to the federal BLM lands within the proposed boundary. It would not apply to private lands, state lands, local agency lands, non-BLM federal lands (e.g., US Bureau of Reclamation). Such a designation would not affect existing lawful use, including development, of private property. Also, designated national monument lands would have clear and legal direction that utility management will not be interfered with. The lands identified for renewable energy development in the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) have been purposely excluded from the proposed national monument. The designation provides a withdrawal of federally held mineral rights, taking the area off the table for industrial energy development and mining.

## **What infrastructure and related activities are permitted within national monuments?**

Existing national monuments have infrastructure and facilities that are not impacted by this designation. Most public and commercial activities continue after national monuments are established. These “existing rights” include access to private property and rights of way for roads and utility infrastructure. The proposed Chuckwalla National Monument has the I-10 freeway and utility/transmission corridors running through it, which would not be affected by national monument designation. As other examples, many national monuments have existing infrastructure included in their boundaries. The following are examples from other Southern California national monuments which include critical infrastructure:

A. The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument has various facilities and infrastructure within its boundaries which are not affected by the national monument designation, including:

- State Highway 74 running through it
- Palm Springs Aerial Tramway access road and Valley Station
- Flood control facilities in Eagle Canyon, Deep Canyon, Palm Canyon
- Numerous CVWD reservoirs including access roads to those facilities
- Portions of Lake Cahuilla County Park
- Residential neighborhoods (Royal Carrizo, Pinyon Crest)

Here's a link to interactive map of SRSJNM boundary: <https://blm-egis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=1bcd4a20d9914d19af4cfa51c93b0d7>

B. The San Gabriel Mountains National Monument includes significant infrastructure which is not affected by the national monument designation:

- State Highways 39 and 2 running through it
- Mount Wilson Observatory
- Morris Reservoir, Morris Reservoir Dam, Cogswell Dam, and San Gabriel Reservoir
- San Dimas Experimental Forest
- Electric transmission lines which have completed upgrades related to fire resilience, and gas pipelines
- Rivers of the San Gabriel Mountains provide 30 percent of drinking water for Los Angeles region

- C. The Sand to Snow National Monument in the northwest corner of the Coachella Valley has infrastructure within the national monument boundary, including:
- A portion of the Colorado River Aqueduct
  - Residential neighborhood (Bonnie Bell)
  - Whitewater Canyon Road

### **How does a National Monument designation affect restoration and mitigation projects?**

Restoration and mitigation activities that CVWD and others are carrying out are considered a very positive benefit to the natural resource protection goals of the proposed national monument. Habitat restoration, maintenance of the natural oases (e.g., Corn Spring), wildlife habitat, and associated mitigation efforts could be identified as monument objects/management focus so that its clear their work wouldn't just be permissible but prioritized to advance natural values like habitat that would be called out in a proclamation.

### **What outreach has been conducted to inform community stakeholders about the proposal?**

The PCD Coalition has been reaching out to community members, organizations, businesses, elected officials, and other interest groups for the last year and a half. Extensive efforts have been made to get community feedback, identify concerns, and answer questions. To date very few concerns have been identified. Outreach efforts include:

1. A presentation was made to the Coachella City Council in the fall of 2022. Coalition members have met with city staff and councilmembers. The city manager has been kept very well informed about the proposal.
2. Local members of the Coalition have presented to mayors/city council members from all valley cities. Meetings have been held with individual mayors, city councilmembers, and members of the Riverside and Imperial County Boards of Supervisors to inform them about the proposed CNM and address any questions/concerns. Comments from many individual elected officials have been positive, encouraging, and supportive.
3. The City of Desert Hot Springs approved a resolution of support for the Chuckwalla National Monument on February 7, 2023. The City of Palm Springs approved a resolution of support on March 23, 2023. Other cities are considering resolutions of support in the coming months.
4. Letters of support have been received from a diverse array of organizations and individuals including local businesses, ecotourism companies, Desert Trails Coalition, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Desert Recreation District, and Latino Outdoors.
5. Meetings have been held with agencies including the Bureau of Land Management, Imperial Irrigation District, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Defense, and Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy to inform them about the proposal and answer questions.
6. The Coachella Valley Conservation Commission has been considering the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument since September 2022. Concerns from CVWD were first identified at their September 2022 meeting.
7. Regular meetings have been held with the staff of Congressman Ruiz and Senators Feinstein and Padilla to keep them up to date on the status of outreach to the community. Concerns from CVWD have been discussed with these staff.
8. An article in the Desert Sun on January 3, 2023, described the Chuckwalla National Monument proposal. Articles have also appeared in the Riverside Press Enterprise and other print media. Coalition members regularly send emails to constituent groups who

have asked to be kept informed. Regular social media posts update on the latest news about this exciting proposal.

**Comments on request to exclude all lands within CVWD territory from the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument Boundary**

We have been made aware of an additional request from CVWD, that all lands within the CVWD boundary be removed from the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument. Most of the land south of the I-10 Freeway that is within the proposed CNM boundary and also CVWD territory is designated Mecca Hills Wilderness, BLM land, or under conservation ownership. Wilderness is the highest level of protection for federal lands and is much more restrictive than a national monument designation. Given the existing and relatively restrictive Wilderness designation, these lands are already not available for facilities development or upgrade. Removing these lands would also eliminate some of the most important outdoor recreational areas (Painted Canyon, Box Canyon, Ladder Canyon) for people living in nearby communities. Non-BLM lands include properties purchased for conservation by local agencies including the non-profit Friends of the Desert Mountains, and the Coachella Valley Conservation Commission. Private lands would by law not be affected by the national monument designation so removing them from the proposed national monument is not necessary. Most of the private lands within this area are in remote and rugged mountain areas where development or infrastructure would be very challenging.

Thank you for your consideration of this information. The members of the Protect California Deserts are available to address any questions or concerns as needed.