

July 10, 2019

TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD – REP. JUDY CHU

Good morning and thank you Chair Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and members of the subcommittee for holding this important hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to speak about my bill, H.R. 2215, San Gabriel Mountains Foothills and Rivers Protection Act, and why it is so important to members of my community in the San Gabriel Valley and throughout Southern California.

The San Gabriel Mountains provide 30% of Southern California’s water, comprise 70% of Los Angeles County’s open space, and are home to historic habitats of species like the California Condor and Nelson Bighorn Sheep. This legislation is the result of decades of advocacy and grassroots efforts to bring more resources and stronger protections to these mountains and the communities that serve as their gateway. In 2014, that advocacy was recognized by President Obama, who designated the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument, immediately bringing new federal funding and resources to the mountains. This designation resulted in the hiring of more staff, extensive cleanups and graffiti removal, and leveraged millions of dollars in private philanthropy. This was a momentous success for the mountains and our communities, but there is still so much more to be done.

My legislation, which has also been introduced in the Senate by Senator Kamala Harris, would build on the successes of President Obama’s declaration by expanding the National Monument to include the western Angeles National Forest, establishing new and expanded wilderness areas, and protecting more than 45 miles of waterways by designating them as Wild and Scenic Rivers. The bill would also establish a new San Gabriel Mountains National Recreation Area that would bolster the critical connection between urban and wild places – helping the communities in the foothills and along the river corridor to improve access to the mountains and provide new recreation opportunities for Angelenos.

And that is so important in the Los Angeles region, which is among the most park-poor in the nation. In fact, Los Angeles County has just 3.3 acres of park space per 1,000 people, which is less than half the median greenspace in other dense cities. And access to parks and public space has real, tangible benefits for public health and wellbeing in our communities. Studies show that having access to parks and green spaces leads to an increase in physical activity of almost 50%! And with more than 15 million people living within a 90-minute drive of the San Gabriel Mountains, investing in their protection and access will pay enormous dividends.

My bill represents the next step in protecting and connecting the San Gabriels, and it is shaped by years of tireless community engagement. In 2003, former Representative and current Los

Angeles County Supervisor Hilda Solis successfully advocated for Congress to authorize the National Park Service to undertake a Special Resource Study of the San Gabriel River watershed to determine whether the area should be incorporated into the National Park System. That decade-long study found that the area would benefit from such an inclusion. In response, our Local governments, water agencies, non-profit organizations, environmental advocates, recreation groups, businesses, firefighters and many other stakeholders came together to back this plan and advocate for measures to make it better. This legislation reflects their priorities and includes language to guarantee that local water rights are preserved, private property is protected, local control rests with cities, and fire management is prioritized.

Since the designation of the National Monument, we've seen our rivers cleaned up, our picnic areas cleared of trash, increased access to trails that are safer and better marked, more rangers interacting with visitors, and most importantly, our entire community at the table developing the management plan for our San Gabriel Mountains. In fact, the best thing to happen since the designation was the creation of the community collaborative, which consists of over 40 members representing a variety of stakeholders such as water, cities, and businesses. This collaborative has led to greater public input with what happens in our mountains and we are much better for it.

However, we are far from done. This same level of resources, protection and collaboration are needed across all the San Gabriel mountains, foothills and rivers. San Gabriel Valley residents and those across Southern California understand how important it is to preserve and protect our treasured lands for current and future generations, especially as climate change threatens habitats and leads to more severe wildfires. The San Gabriel Mountains Foothills and Rivers Protection Act reflects the priorities within our communities and represents a holistic vision for these public lands. So thank you for recognizing those priorities by holding this legislative hearing, and I look forward to the Committee's continued consideration of this important legislation.