

# **Proposed Congressional Districts that Include the San Gabriel and Western San Bernardino National Forests and Adjacent Communities of Interest**

## **Narrative for Presentation to the California Citizens Redistricting Commission for 2022 Congressional Districts 25, 27-29, and 31**

**By Nature for All**

**Represented by Juana Torres and John Monsen**

[Juana]

We would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to speak today. For the last 16 years my colleague John Monsen and I have devoted our professional careers to public lands and equity issues, especially those related to the San Gabriel Mountains. We were part of the effort that established the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument in 2014. John went to elementary school in La Canada. Over the years he has been a resident of Glendale, Tujunga, and Pasadena -- all San Gabriel Mountain foothill cities. I was born in the San Fernando Valley, and way before becoming an advocate for the San Gabriels, as a little girl, my parents would take us up Azusa Canyon into the forest to play and splash around in the San Gabriel River. My dad would always say that it reminded him of the rivers back home in El Salvador, where he and my mom were born.

Today we are representing Nature for All, a nonprofit organization headquartered in the San Gabriel Valley whose iconic view to the north is of the San Gabriel Mountains. Nature for All works to better protect the Angeles and Western San Bernardino National Forests and to make sure everyone in the Los Angeles area has equitable access to the wide range of benefits that nature can provide. Member organizations of this diverse coalition include community groups such as the Council of Mexican Federations and Asian-Pacific Islander Forward Movement and environmental groups like Audubon California and the Sierra Club.

Our primary concern is how the public lands in the Angeles and Western San Bernardino National Forests are placed in Congressional districts and how we can maximize the voice of the public in the management of these federal public lands.. But first let me tell you about our local national forests.

The 1,100 square miles of magnificent public landscapes we are referencing are the Angeles National Forest and the Western San Bernardino National Forest. Located predominantly in Los Angeles County, the area we are referring to is about the same size as Yosemite National Park and it is bounded by I-5 on the west and I-15 to the east, north of the 210 Freeway.

Nowhere else in the United States are millions of urban dwellers located adjacent to such steep and dramatic public lands. These ranges are a biodiversity hotspot featuring robust chaparral ecosystems that are a home for thousands of species.

The Angeles National Forest comprises 70% of the public open space in LA County. It is a recreational oasis for over three million visitors a year, many of whom live within a thirty minute drive of forest gateway cities like Sylmar, Tujunga, La Canada, Pasadena, Sierra Madre, Azusa, Claremont, Upland and Rancho Cucamonga. Some of them come from park-poor communities.

Let me turn it over to John

[John]

We were pleased to address the commission ten years ago and make recommendations that helped shape the current 27th, 28th and 29th congressional districts. The designs generally followed our recommendations that congressional districts that included the San Gabriel Mountains be oriented north to south. This means that the districts would have a section of the Angeles National Forest in the north, a segment of the Foothills Cities Community of Interest next to the south, with districts

generally continuing south into areas that include many high propensity forest users.

We made the case that the civic identities of the foothill cities south and adjacent to the national forest are in many ways defined by their proximity to the range. Hillside housing merges directly into national forest. We mentioned that the community of interest of foothill cities and their residents share common concerns about forest management, including wildfire. South of the community of interest it is beneficial to include park-poor communities near the San Gabriel Mountains a voice in how the forests are managed since these communities use the forest as a recreational alternative.

We are asking you to follow these same principles in 2021 for districts that include the Angeles and Western San Bernardino National Forests. We are proposing 2021 versions of congressional districts 25, 27, 28, and 29. The San Gabriels continue east into the Western San Bernardino National Forest, which is why we will be addressing how the lines should be drawn for the 31st congressional district in San Bernardino County.

How the regionally important public lands Juana described are placed into congressional districts is important. especially to forest-adjacent cities and other nearby communities.

The good news for us is that there is much to like in the way current congressional districts are designed. They generally unite our communities of interest in the same congressional district as the Angeles National Forest. We want to review why the 25th, 27th, 28th and 29th generally work well to encourage you to keep these features in your 2021 district designs. The current placement of the Western San Bernardino National in the 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District does not work and we will recommend an option.

As you know, deference is given to members of Congress on federal public land issues within their districts. Constituents in a congressional district that includes public land have an enhanced ability to have their voices heard about the management of those public lands. Cities in a congressional

district that includes public land can work with their member of Congress to ask for more appropriations for family education programs, more bilingual rangers or changes in policies or legislation. Members of Congress can be an important voice on behalf of their constituents with the US Forest Service, the agency managing the forests.

The Santa Clarita Valley and the Foothill Cities Communities of Interest are defined by the powerful relationship the cities have with their adjacent public lands in the Angeles and Western San Bernardino National Forests. These cities and their residents share common concerns about forest management, including ever growing worries about wildfire in an era of climate change and drought.

The almost 30 cities in our Communities of Interest share many other common traits and concerns about the management of their federal public lands. All have sections of high severity fire zones. They have concerns about Forest Service fire and fuels management, wildfire suppression, zoning, and evacuation routes. Most have experienced fire close to their borders or across them in the last 15 years. They are the highest propensity users of the forests with trails from their communities leading directly into public land.

Having a backyard national forest is part of each Foothill City's DNA and is part of a civic identity. Many foothill communities have historical ties with the Angeles and National Forest, often dating back to the great hiking era of 1890 to 1930s. Many have homes immediately adjacent to the national forests; they share chaparral ecosystems with the forest and have regular visits from forest species. The mountains are a major visual feature and scenic backdrop. The COIs share a spatial orientation with cities often located on slopes rising north. Given that they are downslope from the mountains, foothill cities are concerned about watershed management and flood control. You can often see flood coverage on television when there is significant rain.

All of these shared traits and concerns form powerful communities of interest.

The Santa Clarita Valley is defined by two sections of the Angeles National Forest with important wildlife corridors between the two sections. The main difference between the Santa Clarita and Foothill Cities COIs is the Santa Clarita Valley's orientation to the mountains to the east-west.

Juana is going to tell you about two cities in the Foothill Cities Community of Interest. Juana can you tell us about two of the COIs, La Cañada and Azusa?

[Juana]

### La Cañada

Thank you. La Cañada's identity is shaped in many ways by its proximity to the Angeles National Forest as the community stairsteps up the San Gabriel Mountains with hillside homes extending up to the Angeles Forest boundary. La Cañada is one of the main gateway entry points into the forest. The mountains dominate the northern skyline and they are visible from just about anywhere in the City. La Cañada has become a gateway town thanks in large part to the Angeles Crest Hwy, which was built starting in 1929 and which runs right through the town and up into the forest. Because of this highway, the tens of thousands of people who visit the forest annually stop in La Cañada first in order to shop, get food, gas, etc. and are a major source of economic activity.

Recreation is also a large unifying factor in La Cañada. There are multiple city trails that connect and lead into the mountains. For example, just north of the La Cañada Country Club you can find the scenic Gould Mesa Trailhead, where you can start your hike within the boundaries of the City and end your hike on the Gabrielino Trail within the Angeles National Forest. There is also a sizable equestrian community with a network of trails that lead from the city into the San Gabriel Mountains.

Many La Cañadans were evacuated during the infamous Station Fire in 2009, which began just a few miles north of the city. Like many of its neighboring communities, La Cañada has very high severity fire zones at the forest interface. And it isn't just fire, La Cañadans also care deeply about watershed protection, sediment storage and debris (since La Cañada sits on a steep slope) and about the protection of forest open space and wildlife.

### Azusa

Highway 39, also known as Azusa Canyon Road, is another major entry point into the forest, and runs right through the heart of Azusa and up into the mountains, making Azusa a gateway to the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument and San Gabriel River recreation. It is home to the best Gold Line transit stop for forest entry.

Driving along Highway 39 in Azusa you will begin to see early views of the dramatic canyons of the San Gabriel River whose upstream tributaries are frequented by Azusa residents for recreation. You will also be looking into a different congressional district, CD 27, that the Foothill City Community of interest would better belong in.

Residents of Azusa and other communities in the San Gabriel River watershed frequent the nearby forest primarily for recreation. Costing only \$5 a day for parking with no entry fee, thousands of predominantly Latino families visit the upstream tributaries of the San Gabriel River. Sadly, the recreational conditions these visitors encounter are the worst in the entire Angeles National Forest. Placing Azusa in the 27th district will add one more voice influencing how the Forest is managed.

Similar to La Canada, Azusa also shares a geographical orientation to the mountains, and its impressive peaks are visible from all over town. Water quality and flooding are major concerns to this community, since there are two major dams just north of the City, the Morris and San Gabriel Dams. The river emerges from these dams, at the mouth of the canyon in Azusa, where the entire flow of the river is then diverted into the first of several

spreading grounds that recharge the local aquifer which is an important source of water supply for the City.

Let me turn it back to John.

[John]:

Here are our specific recommendations for new Congressional districts 25, 27, 28, 29 and 31 based on our design criteria.

We approve of the way the current district keeps the Castaic section of Angeles National Forest in one congressional district along with the Santa Clarita Valley Cities Community of Interest (Santa Clarita, Castaic, Agua Dulce). The Santa Clara watershed defines the district on the east as it interfaces with the main section of the Angeles National Forest on the East. We concur with those suggesting that the district extend north into Kern County but no longer west into Simi Valley.

The 27th as it appears today generally follows our basic principles as well but could benefit from the addition of Azusa, San Dimas and La Verne so that all of the Foothill Cities Community of Interest in the district is included. In our map we only added Azusa since this is all the total district population will allow. We think it more important to add Azusa than El Monte to the district as some other proposals suggest. As Juana pointed out, Azusa is a gateway city to the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument and San Gabriel River recreation areas.

The existing 28th congressional district is an example of how it should be done. An intact segment of the Foothill Cities Community of Interest from Tujunga east to La Canada is included along with a substantial section of the San Gabriel Mountains the COI's the north, sometimes to the northern boundary of the national forest as we recommend. We have adjusted the district map to reduce population variance.

The 29th district includes the Western section of the Foothill Cities Community of interest (Pacoima and Sylmar). The inclusion of the small

section of the Angeles National Forest to the north meets our north-south orientation requirements. This provides the district's large Latino base with a member of Congress who can speak to National Forest related issues such as improved transit to trails.

The San Gabriel Mountains continue east into the Western San Bernardino National Forest. Rancho Cucamonga, Upland and San Antonio Heights -- which are part of the Foothill Cities Community of Interest -- should be in the 31st district. These cities have many ties to the National Forest to their north. The cities are major gateways to the Mt. Baldy ski area, an often hiked 10,000 foot peak, and trails into the Western San Bernardino National Forest from the south. Rancho Cucamonga has many concerns about its interface with the national forest including fire and fuels management. Trails from its Etiwanda Preserve lead into the National Forest immediately to the city's north. Wrightwood and Lyte Creek would also be in 31st.

Thank you very much.