



February 10, 2020

The Honorable
Assemblymember
Ramos
State Capitol, Room 2176

James C.
California
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Desert Conservancy Legislation

Dear Assemblymember Ramos,

On behalf of our organizations and the millions of members and supporters we represent in the desert region/California, we are writing to request that you consider carrying legislation to establish a desert conservancy program within the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB).

The California deserts merit increased public attention and investment. The desert region is the homeland of numerous tribal communities since time immemorial. This region also includes disadvantaged communities that would benefit from an investment in this irreplaceable resource. California funding initiatives, including past bonds, have invested far less conservation funding into the desert than other areas of California, particularly those regions with existing state conservancies.

The desert region is home to the largest still-intact ecosystem in the lower 48 states. Comprising more than one-fourth of our state, the California deserts' 26 million acres contain 38% of the native plant species within the state. Of that 38%, 25% are endemic to the desert. The California deserts also serve residents across eight counties contained within the California Desert Conservation Area, an impressive population bloc exceeding 19 million residents – 48% of the entire state.

This region has become an international destination with visitation to Joshua Tree and Death Valley National Parks and Mojave National Preserve increasing by 129%, 110% and 59%, respectively

within the last decade. The jump in public interest in California's desert has provided a regional economic boost: direct travel spending for the desert region amounted to \$7.6 billion dollars in 2018, with an increase of 6.7 percent between 2017-2018. Desert tourism and travel generated 73,000 jobs in 2018 while providing \$609 million in tax revenue for local and state governmental entities.

But as the desert lands have increased in popularity and revenue provision, they in turn require funding so that we may work towards conservation land acquisition, restoration and management, and education to preserve these invaluable resources from ongoing threats related to climate change. Climate modeling has predicted that the California desert region is on the frontline of climate change, getting hotter and drier each year. Indeed, scientists are already documenting significant climate impacts.

With the creation of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan and the California Desert Biological Conservation Framework in 2016, which was developed during an eight-year stakeholder process between state and federal agencies, local communities, tribes, and other stakeholders, this region has the benefit of a robust, science based, climate-driven conservation strategy that connects a network of currently protected federal and state lands, including areas identified for future conservation and management to ensure that the desert and its natural resources are resilient to the impacts of climate change.

What is missing is directed investment into the California desert region to protect and restore the natural and cultural resources and the recreational and economic benefits they provide.

We respectfully request you consider carrying legislation this year to create a desert conservancy program within the WCB. The purpose of this program would be to approve projects that preserve, restore, and enhance desert habitat. The WCB would be directed to fund projects that address the impacts of climate change; protect, enhance, or restore desert habitat and sacred ancestral lands of local indigenous peoples; provide public access or recreational amenities; or reduce the threats of wildfire, drought, flood, and other catastrophic events. Priority should be given to projects that protect the cultural rights of tribal communities, create jobs, or enhance the local economy while protecting the integrity of the desert ecosystem.

Thank you for your strong advocacy for the California desert region. We appreciate all your work to protect and revitalize this region. We look forward to working with you and your staff on this important matter.

Sincerely,

Frank Ruiz
Salton Sea Program Director
Audubon California

Linda Castro, J.D.
Assistant Policy Director
CalWild

Pamela Flick
California Program Director
Defenders of Wildlife

Shanna Edberg
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Columba Quintero
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Brandon Dawson
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Jack Thompson
California Desert Regional Director
The Wildlands Conservancy

Kate Hoit
California Director
Vet Voice