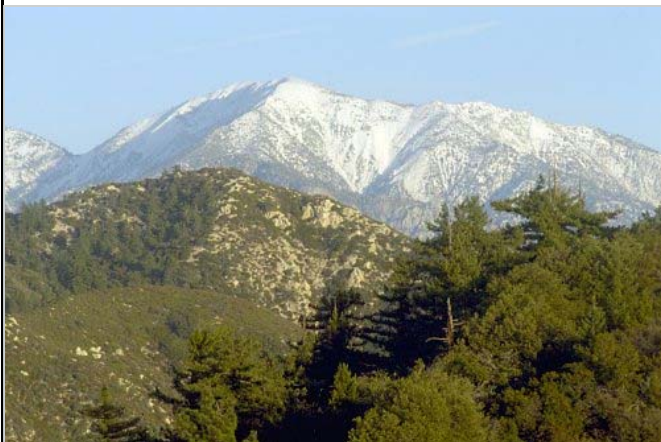


San Gabriel Mountains could get new federal designation, more money

By Rebecca Kimitch, Staff Writer

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Snow-covered Mt. San Antonio towers over other peaks in the Angeles National Forest. (SGVN/Staff photo by Bernardo Albs)

For the first time ever, the San Gabriel Mountains and the land along the San Gabriel River could become a National Recreation Area, which would bring new money and resources.

New trails and picnic areas, more park rangers and explanatory signs, and increased connections between the mountains and local parks could result from the process.

"We are very excited that the San Gabriels are

finally getting some attention and that the shortage of resources here is being highlighted by the federal government," said Juana Torres, associate regional representative of the Sierra Club.

The National Park Service initially considered creating a national park in the area. The agency deemed local natural resources unique and significant enough to be protected as a national park. But in a study released Tuesday, the agency determined a national park is not feasible.

The San Gabriel Mountains are some of the fastest-growing mountains in the world, growing as much as 2 inches a year. They also host 123 wildlife species and 73 plants considered sensitive or endangered. And the upper reaches of the San Gabriel River meet the criteria for Wild and Scenic River designation.

Instead, the park service has proposed several options for new collaborations that could bring National Park Service rangers and resources to the region for the first time. The San Gabriel range and its watershed could also be declared a National Recreation Area.

"They are finally recognizing the tremendous recreational opportunity here." Torres said. "You have 15 million people, many from park-poor areas who can use this forest."

Congress requested the study in 2003 to determine how to increase opportunities for San Gabriel Valley residents to connect with the natural resources in the area.

The National Park Service is now looking for public input on its proposals.

Three alternatives offer varying boundaries for a National Recreation Area, varying levels of involvement by the National Park Service, and different types of partnerships with the National Forest Service and local agencies.

All would, in theory, bring increased resources and attention to the area, according to project manager Martha Crusius. A final proposal will be presented to Congress in 2011.

Congress recently gave a portion of the San Gabriel Mountains wilderness protection - the highest protection under federal law. And much of the range is partially protected through the Angeles National Forest.

But the area's recreational value has been "very undervalued" by the federal government, according to Jane Beesley, project manager for the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, which collaborated on the NPS study.

Beesley and others say the Santa Monica Mountains have received much more recognition for their recreational value than the San Gabriels, despite the range's popularity.

About 1.5 million people visit the San Gabriel Canyon portion of the forest every year. But some popular areas have few rangers and bathrooms, Torres said. Picnic tables and parking spaces fill quickly, and a few times a year access is completely shut down.

"It is very difficult to manage all the recreational use we get," said Marty Dumpis, deputy forest supervisor for the Angeles National Forest. "The demand is greater than the area can possibly support."

Dumpis said forest access needs to be expanded, but so does access to regional and local parks.

"Right now, the Angeles National Forest is 72 percent of all open space in Los Angeles County. We don't want that to be 90 percent in 20 years," he said.

PHOTO GALLERY



Angeles National Forest

Because parks in the Valley along the San Gabriel River are part of the forest's larger watershed and ecosystem, they should be part of a future National Recreation Area, Dumpis and others said.

One of the study's proposals would establish such a regional area - San Gabriel Watershed National Recreation Area.

Under this proposal, the National Park Service could bring its expertise, and its well-recognized arrowhead logo, to informational signs along the area, often referred to as the Emerald Necklace, Beesley said.

In addition to recognition of recreational value, the latest federal attention underscores the national geological, biological and cultural significance of the nearby range, Crusius said.

"We know we live in a nationally significant area, and we think our river is nationally significant ... so it's nice to have that recognition," Beesley said.

rebecca.kimitch@sgvn.com

(626) 962-8811, Ext. 2105