

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Witness Statement

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Concerning H.R. 1751, the Carrizo Plain National Conservation Area Act
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands, Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives
May 4, 2000

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, The Nature Conservancy appreciates this opportunity to testify before you regarding H.R. 1751, the Carrizo Plain National Conservation Area Act, introduced by Congresswoman Lois Capps. The Conservancy's interest and involvement in the management of the resources of this unique area goes back more than 15 years.

Vast grasslands like the Carrizo Plain were once common over large portions of California's Central Valley. Such landscapes, along with many of the species and unique habitats that thrived within them, have been virtually eliminated by conversion of wild lands to agricultural production and urban development throughout the Central Valley.

It is estimated that only 4 percent of the original San Joaquin grassland remains, and the Carrizo Plain - nicknamed "California's Serengeti" - is the largest intact piece of that small remnant that exists today.

Because of its large expanse of relatively intact ecosystem, and the concentration of both state and federally-listed and candidate plant and animal species that are known or suspected to occur within the area, it is absolutely crucial that this area be managed appropriately. Accordingly, the Carrizo Plain Natural Area was identified in the "*Biological Framework for Natural Lands and Endangered Species in the Southern San Joaquin Valley*" as a Threatened and Endangered Species Management Area. The Carrizo Plain supports an abundance of rare species and habitats. It provides important wildlife habitat and migration corridors for tule elk, San Joaquin kit fox, pronghorn sheep, sandhill crane, mountain plover, and even the California condor. The northern portion of the Carrizo supports a significant number of vernal pools and alkali sinks, rarely found in California, which in turn support unusual species including the recurved larkspur, Hoover's woolly star, and the diamond-petaled poppy.

The Conservancy, working closely in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG), and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), first began to explore the acquisition of major portions of this more than 250,000-acre area in 1984. The goal then, and now, is for the area to function as a single, large "macropreserve" not only for the many rare and endangered San Joaquin Valley species, but also for the wide assemblage of other plants and animals in the area.

A steering committee -- comprising representatives from The Nature Conservancy, each of the above-mentioned government agencies, local governments (San Luis Obispo and Kern Counties), the California Energy Commission, the National Audubon Society, the University of California at Riverside, energy and mineral companies with holdings in the region, and several local public representatives -- was created in 1985 to guide the conceptual development of the project which became the Carrizo Plain Natural Area..

Between 1985 and 1988, that committee met repeatedly with state and federal government representatives and local political advocacy groups, and in the process generated both the necessary support and the funding to achieve significant acquisition and appropriate resource management.

Today, a blueprint for management of the area is articulated in the "Carrizo Plain Natural Area Management Plan," adopted in November 1996 after a long public process. The plan includes the mission, vision, and standard operating procedures that reflect the ongoing and cooperative effort between the managing partners (The Nature Conservancy, DFG, and BLM) and Native Americans, USFWS, and members of the public.

The mission, as stated in the plan is *"to manage the CPNA so that indigenous species interact within a dynamic and fully functioning system in perpetuity while conserving unique natural and cultural resources and maintaining opportunities for compatible scientific research, cultural, social and recreational activities."*

Congresswoman Capps' legislation has generated renewed interest among the diverse stakeholders who share an interest in the long-term conservation of this area's natural beauty and many resources--which are not only biological in nature, but also cultural, agricultural, recreational and historical. The Conservancy appreciates that the legislation places significant emphasis on the management plan, as well as providing for the continuation of the cooperative partnership and decision-making process which has been so successful to date. The Secretary of the Interior, affected landowners, Native Americans, DFG and The Nature Conservancy have worked together for more than a decade to identify goals and objectives for the area and the management practices necessary to realize and implement them.

The Carrizo Plain's abundant, valuable and unique resources, coupled with the enduring and successful partnership of agencies and individuals, make this area an excellent candidate for National Conservation Area designation.

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