

**STATEMENT BY JOSEPH R. "RICK" RUIZ, GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER,
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CONSERVANCY**

**HEARING ON H.R. 2534
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION & PUBLIC LANDS**

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1334 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Christian-Christensen, and Members of the Committee, I am very grateful to have this opportunity to testify on this bill today.

I am supporting Representative Solis' Bill for some very personal reasons as well as some important policy reasons.

I grew up in Maywood, a tiny little city of about 10,000 residents located along the banks of the Lower Los Angeles River, just down stream from downtown Los Angeles. Please don't confuse Maywood for Mayberry. My hometown was surrounded by steel mills, paint factories, warehouses, slaughterhouses ... it was the industrial heartland of post war Southern California.

There was one tiny little park in Maywood, not nearly enough to satisfy everyone. So what did we do? We made the Los Angeles River our playground.

The Los Angeles River is a concrete ditch that runs about 50 miles from the San Fernando Valley to Long Beach. Most of the concrete was poured in the 1930s in order to provide jobs and flood control. It was not much more than an open sewer for carrying away industrial wastes, stormwater runoff, slaughterhouse debris and who knows what else. Frankly, I'm a little surprised that I survived.

My personal reason for supporting this study is that I believe that we can create better places for kids to play in the future. I want the children of tomorrow to play in a clean, healthy and environmentally dynamic Los Angeles River, not the river I grew up with.

Granted, much has changed since my childhood in the late 1950s and 1960s. Local activists like Lewis McAdams, Andy Lipkis, Dorothy Green, Melanie Winters and a host of others taught us to see the Los Angeles River, and all rivers, for that matter, as a potential resource, not just a conduit for waste.

Later, forward thinking legislators like Rep. Solis created a conservancy for both the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers. With significant help from Governor Gray Davis, the Conservancy was brought to life about two years ago and is now helping to give focus to the vision.

The San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy encompasses about 1,500 square miles. More than 7 million people live within its boundaries. I'm proud to say that we recently produced an award-winning land use plan called "Common Ground: from the Mountains to the Sea." In a nutshell, the conservancy's job is to preserve and enhance the recreational and environmental resources of these rivers and the watersheds from which they spring. It's a huge job, we are just beginning, and we could use some help.

I jumped at the chance to talk to you today because, from a policy perspective, it makes a great deal of sense to study the possibility of creating a new urban national park in Southern California. A few years ago it would have sounded insane to use Los Angeles River and national park in the same sentence. Today it is beginning to make a great deal of sense.

These two watersheds are central to the prosperity of the region. They provide much of the drinking water for more than 5 million people in the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys and for neighborhoods further south all the way to Long Beach. Without a well-managed water supply this region simply could not exist as we know it today. It is vital to protect the quality of our water supply and enhance the way we use it for recreational, business and environmental purposes.

I believe that the National Park Service might help us do that.

As I mentioned earlier, recreational land is scarce in Southern California. The Sustainable Cities Program at the University of Southern California estimates that a healthy community should have about three to four acres of open space for each 1,000 residents. The San Gabriel Valley has about one-half acre per 1,000 residents. It's worse in some other neighborhoods.

National park status could help us provide better recreational and economic development opportunities associated with increased tourism and recreation.

While much of the land that would be studied under this bill is dense, urbanized and overdeveloped, we also have some of the most rugged mountains in the country. Within a few miles of the San Gabriel Valley, which is home to over one million people, portions of the upper San Gabriel River are so wild that they are eligible for wild and scenic river status. It is an incredibly rich environment that is home to birds, bears, deer, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats and many other important plants and animals.

Sadly, the Conservancy's Land Use Plan contains a list more than four pages long of the threatened and endangered species that live within our boundaries.

The national parks have historically been there to help us protect the nation's environmental resources and it seems likely that they could help us in Southern California.

Many of us believe that expanding our partnership with the federal government through the establishment of a national park would result in a tremendous synergy.

I know that this is a big step that would require a serious commitment of resources. I also understand that we all have questions, and we all need answers. That's why the study proposed in H.R. 2534 is a vital first step.

Thank you again for giving me this time to address you today.