

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Witness Statement

Testimony of Sheldon D. Clark
President, Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum
RE: H.R. 2941, Las Cienegas National Conservation Area Establishment Act

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum (Forum), I would like to thank Congressman Hansen, Chairman, and the members of the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands for the opportunity to submit this testimony for consideration. As a resident of southeastern Arizona for approximately 39 years, I have lived, worked and played within the proposed boundaries of the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (NCA). During that period I have witnessed rapid growth and development pressures that would forever alter the unique character of the Cienega Creek Basin.

The passage of this bill would provide a collaborative management scheme over a landscape that contains outstanding aquatic, archeological, cultural historical, recreational scenic and wildlife resources. This proposed legislation encompasses over 200,000 acres of BLM, private, county park, and state trust lands that connect nine mountain ranges. Preserving these connections would form a regionally significant, 90-mile long corridor of open space that extends from the Rincon Mountains east of Tucson to the Mexican border. The lands contained within the proposed boundaries of the NCA include approximately 100,000 acres of state trust land; 50,000 acres of BLM land, including the Empire-Cienega Resource Conservation Area; 5,000 acres of Pima County parkland, including Colossal Cave Mountain Park and Cienega Creek Natural Preserve, and approximately 50,000 acres of private property. Participation by private land owners within the NCA, would be voluntary through exchange, donation or purchase of conservation easements from those landowners who wish to sell their development rights. Private land owners would continue to participate in development of a management strategy for the area that includes continued commitment to multiple use concepts. County parklands within the NCA would be managed in coordination with Pima County, while state lands - or easements on them - would be acquired over time using available methods for acquisition.

Among the numerous resources within the NCA worthy of protection are:

Water: The proposed conservation area includes numerous perennial stream reaches and springs, including portions of Cienega Creek and the Babocomari River. Twice in our life time the water resources within the basin have been targeted for development in support of major development projects. First in the early 1970's, to support 50,000 unit subdivision planned by Gulf American Corporation, and again in the early 1980's when the Anamax Mining Company sought to develop the groundwater resources of the Empire and Cienega Ranches to support mining and benefaction of the Helvetia copper deposits in the Santa Rita Mountains. Suburban development in the Tucson and Sierra Vista areas, represent the most probable threat to the water resources of the Cienega basin, as do rapid residential development in the Sonoita - Elgin Area.

Habitat - The proposed NCA includes increasingly rare habitat types, including cienegas, cottonwood-willow riparian forests, sacaton grasslands, mesquite bosques, and semi-desert highland grasslands. These

areas provide habitat for three species of native fish, including the endangered Gila Top Minnow, ten bat species, including the endangered lesser long nose bat; the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher, the Chiricahua leopard frog; and a host of large mammals including pronghorn antelope, deer, black bear, javalina, mountain lions and other important species of wildlife.

Archeological and Historic Resources - the proposed NCA contains hundred of rare prehistoric sites, as well as historic travel routes, ranch houses, mines and mining towns. The original structures of the Empire Ranch, one of the largest ranching and mining empires created in turn of the century Arizona are currently part of an ambitious restoration project sponsored by the Empire Ranch Foundation.

Caves - the proposed NCA contains historic Colossal Cave and other caves that contain artifacts, and fossils records that are invaluable records of pre-historic conditions in the Southwestern U.S.

Scenic Views - the visual resources of the proposed NCA are unparalleled in Southeastern Arizona. In spite of the close proximity to the Tucson and Sierra Vista metropolitan areas, the Cienega basin is remarkably intact and unfragmented, providing unique visual integrity. The visual resources of the expansive native grasslands, oak woodlands, and the adjoining mountain ranges host two state-designated scenic highways, and have served as the back drop for Hollywood features including *A Star is Born*, *Tombstone* and *Tin Cup*.

Recreation Opportunities - the proposed NCA provides hiking, camping, mountain biking, horseback riding, birding, off highway touring, hunting and astronomy in close proximity to the Tucson and Sierra Vista metropolitan areas.

These resources and the benefits derived from their protection have been identified by area stakeholders through countless numbers of meetings of the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership and of the Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum.

Benefits of the Las Cienegas NCA

In addition to making surrounding communities more livable by protecting accessible open space landscapes and preventing further urban sprawl, the proposed NCA provides several tangible economic benefits including:

- prevention of the urbanization of the Cienega Creek watershed, thereby protecting the downstream communities of Vail and Tucson from increased flooding and sediment transport hazards.
- The Cienega Creek watershed is estimated to provide the Tucson basin with approximately 6,200 acre-feet of high quality natural recharge per year.
- the safeguard of critical habitat connections that link protected areas in southeastern Arizona an northern Mexico.
- protection of the investment of approximately \$40 million dollars in public investment in the Empire-Cienega Conservation area; and,
- the preservation of traditional land uses through responsible and sustainable grazing and recreation activities.

The Process of Developing the NCA Legislation

The process by which the NCA legislation was drafted and introduced is probably the most remarkable feature of this conservation proposal. The legislation is based, from its inception, on the recognition by all

the stakeholders, those that live in the area, those that make their livelihood from the resource, and those that come to Cienega Creek for recreational opportunities, that this resource is worth protecting. That recognition has resulted in broad community support for the proposed legislation, and has affirmed the public commitment to the concept of multiple use in resource management.

The proposed NCA legislation did not emerge overnight. In 1995, the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership (SVPP) was formed to work on public lands issues in the Empire-Cienega Resource Conservation Area, which Bureau of Land Management (BLM) established in 1988. To their credit, the BLM recognized the need for broad based community involvement in public lands management. The SVPP is comprised of hiking clubs, equestrian groups, conservation organizations, grazing and mining interests, residents, off-highway vehicle clubs, mountain bike clubs, as well as federal, state, and county government entities. Beginning in 1996, these efforts were complemented by a parallel process initiated by the Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum. The Forum's focus was to develop land use policy recommendations for consideration by Santa Cruz County to address the rapidly changing private land uses in the area. The development of the management plans for the BLM lands and the private lands evolved into a community driven collaborative process from which the NCA legislation emerged. This collaborative management strategy is the core of the NCA legislation. The broad, community based management strategy is fundamental to the future success of the NCA, and will insure that all stakeholders have a say and a responsibility for the successful management of the resource.

Some critics of the proposed legislation have claimed it was introduced in response to partisan election year politicking, or possibly to forestall future designation of the area as National Monument. Both of these criticisms are show a cynical lack of appreciation for the 5 years of hard work that has gone into the NCA legislation and the draft management plan. This process, though slow and time consuming, provides numerous benefits over traditional state and Federal conservation initiatives. This process has improved relationships between stakeholders, and created greater understanding of differing outlooks and concerns related to the management of the resource. Most importantly, this process has reaffirmed the faith of many of the participants that government can work for the people.

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