

**Written testimony of Congressman Howard P. “Buck” McKeon
On H.R. 6156, the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Mountains Wild
Heritage Act of 2008**

**Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
September 11, 2008**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to speak to you on my legislation. Today I am grateful for the opportunity to bring before you H.R. 6156, The Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Mountains Wild Heritage Act. This legislation is many years in the making, and enjoys a level of community input and cooperation unique for a bill of this type. The legislation addresses decades old land use conflicts throughout the 25th Congressional District of California, while at the same time preserving our collective natural heritage for generations to come.

Local input and support for an Eastern Sierra wilderness bill has been overwhelming. I have with me here today Vikki Bauer, Chair of the Mono County Board of Supervisors. She is one of the many local leaders I consulted in drafting H.R. 6156. Using their input Senator Boxer and I were able to negotiate further refinements to the bill you have before you today. This collaborative and exhaustive process has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career and I am happy to share the success of this process with local leaders like Vikki.

Since the introduction of H.R. 6156 in May of this year the question on many people’s minds has been: Why is a Republican Congressman such as myself championing a wilderness bill? The answer is not complicated. In order to secure continuing economic and recreational opportunities in the Eastern Sierras compromise was necessary. The 25th Congressional District is one of the largest districts in the country – with over 95% of the land in Mono and Inyo Counties owned by the Federal government. The ramifications of this Federal ownership can be readily seen around the District, and often pits the needs of the public with those of the Federal government. Securing greater opportunities for public use of these lands prompted me to push for the release of Wilderness Study Areas, guaranteeing access to winter recreation opportunities and ensuring continued access to well loved off-road areas. All these efforts on H.R. 6156 required reaching across the aisle to craft a viable bill.

H.R. 6156 is truly a bipartisan effort. Having brought Senator Boxer on board as a cosponsor of my first wilderness effort in the 109th Congress, we both agreed to craft a new comprehensive bill for the 110th. I want to take this opportunity to thank her and her staff for their diligence throughout the 19 month negotiations that have resulted in H.R. 6156.

I am especially pleased to bring this bill to you as a shining example of community involvement. The many land use conflicts occurring in the Eastern Sierra were quickly brought to my attention following my election in 2003 to represent Inyo and Mono Counties. By building on the first hand experiences of my constituents I was able to ensure H.R. 6156 met their needs. My office has met repeatedly with virtually every stake holder, from managing agencies to county official to local recreation advocates, and a large number of changes and accommodations were made at their behest prior to introduction of H.R. 6156.

Following introduction of the bill both my staff and the Senator’s presented the bill directly to the public thru County Board of Supervisor hearings in both Mono and Inyo County.

In this unique process hundreds of constituents attended and voiced their feelings about the bill directly to our staff and local elected leaders. We worked in tandem with local representatives from the Forest Service, BLM, CA Fish and Game, local agriculture community and many others to address their concerns. Those changes were then incorporated into the bill, resulting in the multitude of official support letters and motions I have here.

Specifically H.R. 6156 would designate over 400,000 acres of wilderness in the Eastern Sierra's of Mono and Inyo Counties and 70,000 in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Los Angeles. While many of these areas are already successfully protected from many destructive human activities by the management plans of the Forest Service and BLM, I feel strongly that these areas should have a higher level of protection. As the California population continues to grow we often see short-sighted planning that fails to take into account the needs of future generations. By protecting these areas as wilderness we will insure our great, great grandchildren will be able to enjoy these areas as we do today. The threat of unchecked development into these pristine areas may not be imminent – however California population is projected to reach 60 million people by 2050. Planning for that growth today will ensure future generations have opportunity to see these incredible places unspoiled.

Our public waterways will also be affected by future grow. In addition to the wilderness designations the bill also designates over 50 miles of the Amargosa River, Cottonwood Creek, Owens Headwaters, and Piru Creek as wild and scenic rivers. These designations will allow for the multitude of current activities enjoyed on these rivers to continue for generations to come, while at the same time helping to secure the badly needed water resources of Southern California's huge urban populations.

As a direct result of the collaborative efforts on H.R. 6156 I am happy to report over 50,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas will be released from further consideration as wilderness. These areas have been in administrative limbo for almost 3 decades. The respective managing agencies have all recommended these areas be released and I am happy to finally implement their recommendations here in Congress. Just as we are protecting wilderness quality lands from future development we must also recognize the vast potential for public resources yet to be found in the Eastern Sierras.

The release of these WSA's guarantees the public will have greater flexibility in future land use planning. Still there are a multitude of additional WSA's in my district that are recommended for release. One such area, the Bodie WSA in northern Mono County has great potential for mineral resources. The economic benefit to the local community would be huge, and I look forward to working with managing agencies and my colleagues to facilitate environmentally responsible development of mineral resources throughout the region.

Enhancing economic opportunities in the rural areas of CA-25 remains one of the most important aspects of this bill. Many economists have demonstrated wilderness designations increase tourism and bring money into rural counties around the West. Along with the wilderness designation I am also happy to announce the creation of the Bridgeport Winter Recreation Area. This winter recreation area will provide badly needed economic activity during the winter months. This 11,000 acre complex will provide some of the best winter recreation opportunities in the state, bringing increased viability to the community of Bridgeport in northern Mono County. Furthermore the ability to enter and exit the area has been greatly increased with the legalized crossing of the Pacific Crest Trail and I want to specifically thank the Pacific Crest Trail Association for working with us on H.R. 6156.

Mr. Chairman, I am deeply grateful to the residents of my district for the dedication they have shown in providing input on in this legislation, and I am pleased to offer the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Mountains Wild Heritage Act.