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## Congress to decide between Park Service or Forest Service

By Steve Scauzillo, Staff Writer

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People ride horses in Rancho Sierra Vista-Satwiwa in Thousand Oaks Tuesday, November 22, 2011. The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, that includes a cultural significant area for the Chumash, is just one piece of the National Park Service that is linking land from Thousand Oaks to Agoura Hills to the coast near Malibu. The National Park Service is planning to link various land and parks together in the San Gabriel Valley for preservation and recreation. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)

**Photo gallery:** [National Parks Service: What's next for the SGV](#)

Six years of studies costing more than \$500,000, two months of public meetings and years of debate are over.

The question of whether the National Park Service should step in and co-manage the San Gabriel Mountains, San Gabriel River and a portion of the Puente Hills is headed for Congress in December.

But the complicated proposal which marries one federal agency with another, belies a more fundamental question: Will the region get more funding for recreational uses under the NPS? Or should the region stick with the U.S. Forest Service alone?

Most who've attended public hearings and are following the issue favor the NPS. These are the environmentalists, members of Congress and nonprofit groups who have worked the system to get to this critical stage.

Others, who've seen it both ways, also seem to favor declaring the region's precious greenbelt a National Recreation Area co-run by the National Park Service. The new "NPS park unit" would stretch from the tip of Mount Wilson to Whittier Narrows and Santa Fe Springs and eastward into the dark canyons of the Puente/Whittier Hills.

Why bring in another layer of the federal government?

The answer may be as simple as what's in a name, and as complicated as the workings of the federal

bureaucracy.

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Experts interviewed for this story point out that the U.S. Forest Service, charged with managing the Angeles National Forest, is an arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is charged with a multi-use mandate of resource management, which can include logging and mining federal lands, fire suppression and prevention, and last, visitor management.

In contrast, the National Park Service simply preserves habitat and historical areas for Americans to visit, enjoy and appreciate. In short, the word "park" is in its name and that can make the money flow from D.C. to the SGV faster and deeper than from any division of the Agriculture Department.

"The Forest Service doesn't get the funding the way the Parks Service does - from inside the Department of the Interior. For whatever reason, people are real sentimental about parks so they (NPS) get a much more direct funding stream," said Gordon Bonser, 62, a private consultant who studies funding for NRAs and national monuments.

One of the proposals was simply to leave everything the way it is, something favored by Barret Wetherby of the California Trail Users Coalition in Glendale. One questioner attending the NPS hearing at Cal Poly Pomona last week asked: "Can't we just leave the management system alone and get Congress to send more money to the Forest Service?" It's an option Wetherby's group favors, but not many else.

The overwhelming majority of proponents want to see Alternative D, a 581,500-acre National Recreation Area that would be infused by National Park rangers, common signs linking all uses, biologists and resource specialists helping cities to better connect residents to the rivers, hills or forest. By helping low-income residents in El Monte, Bassett, Azusa, West Covina and Montebello get better access to hiking, biking and fresh air, cities believe they can slow the onslaught of childhood and adult-onset

diabetes.

Martha Crusius, project manager, said the NPS is better at making parks: "The National Park Service has been more successfully funded in recent years. The NPS has a line item budget for each park, unlike the diffuse U.S. Forest Service funding."

Bonser, a former U.S. Forest Service employee whose wife works for the NPS, said the funding from the Park Service versus funding for recreation from the Department of Agriculture is like night and day.

"They (Forest Service) are like the little cow that is last in line at the feeding trough," Bonser said.

The NPS, as well as the Sierra Club, San Gabriel Mountains Forever, the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, Rep. Judy Chu, Sen. Barbara Boxer and the author of the originating

legislation in 2003, former congresswoman Hilda Solis who is now the U.S. Secretary of Labor, all want to see a substantial NPS role in the San Gabriel Valley.



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Runners pass a Chumash ap house at Satwiwa Natural Area in Rancho Sierra Vista Tuesday, November 22, 2011 in Thousand Oaks. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)

Even the Forest Service, according to NPS officials, favors the NPS coming into the region to help with trail building, maintenance, cleanup, signage, access and education. However, the Service has declined to answer questions from this newspaper about the proposal.

"The Forest Service doesn't have enough staff or funds to manage the 3.5 million visitors it receives each year," said NPS landscape architect in charge of the San Gabriel Watershed and Mountains Special Resource Study, Barbara Butler.

"The U.S. Forest Service, more and more, its budget is going into fire protection rather than visitor management," she added.

#### Does it work elsewhere?

Making a cohesive recreational experience amid 17 million people in Southern California is exactly what President Obama's America's Great Outdoors initiative dictates. That's why Department of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is reportedly personally in favor of creating a local NRA and sending in the Parks Service.

Proponents need only look west to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area for a model.

This 150,000-acre NRA, established in 1978, is managed by the NPS in cooperation with 12 cities, the state parks department and the local Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.

"If you use the Santa Monica Mountains (NRA) as a model of what could possibly happen, absolutely, it has brought more resources to the area," said Woody Smeck, superintendent of the SMMNRA.

"Governments working together can achieve a lot more than they could in isolation," Smeck said.

The SMMNRA's operating budget as supplied by the NPS in 2009 was \$8.6 million, and that included a staff of 99 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees, according to the NPS study on the San Gabriel NRA. Other areas where an NRA was created in an urban setting include: Boston Harbor Islands, \$1.2 million budget and 14 FTEs and the Mississippi NRA, \$2.1 million and 28 FTEs.

According to a 2007 study from the U.S. Forest Service, forest recreation sites in the Angeles received \$1.65 million in assets from appropriated funds and fees, while annual operating and maintenance costs were \$2.3 million. The Forest Service had a deferred maintenance backup of \$9.1 million.



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The report, which was withdrawn, proposed cutting back on recreation uses. It included suggestions to close dozens of picnic grounds and campgrounds in order to help balance its budget.

Today, many campgrounds remain closed. The Crystal Lake campground, which became accessible when Caltrans finished Highway 39 to the Crystal Lake turnoff in March, is still not officially open. Anecdotal evidence says some people camp there but the Forest Service does not advertise the campground on any reservation-based website, nor has it been able to find a concessionaire to manage it.

### NPS vs. USFS

Jim Blomquist, a veteran of preservation battles up and down the state, went to the Cal Poly Pomona meeting to support the creation of an NRA as a way to get the San Gabriel Valley additional park funding, not just from the feds, but from corporations and private nonprofits.

The NPS should start with co-managing the Angeles National Forest.

"This is the forest that is closest to the largest number of people in America. What better opportunity than this!" he said.

Blomquist, now a consultant with Friends of the River, a Northern California nonprofit group, said the proposal will set in motion long-awaited improvements to wild areas, from bike trails to cleaner mountain streams to easier access points.

First, it would force the National Park Service to create a recreation management plan for the San Gabriel River, mountains and Puente Hills. This new "park unit" would have a line item in the NPS budget, something that has never happened with the U.S. Forest Service, nor the mishmash of agencies overseeing the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel River restoration.

"The mandate in the bill would be to increase recreational opportunities," Blomquist said. "Right now, there is no mandate. Now, there is nothing to increase recreational services with the Forest Service."

Bonser, who lives in Crescent City, says the decision to establish an NRA along the pristine Smith River but allow management by the Forest Service (since it rises to 10,000 feet in elevation) was a mistake.

"The Forest Service management ... has been an unfunded mandate," Bonser said. "The tiny staff does the best it can, but lacks the resources to do more than passively maintain a minimum number of visitor facilities."

He is recommending the NPS take a strong role in the San Gabriel river and mountains park unit. He warns San Gabriel Valley residents not to make the same mistake.

"How much better off would we have been if we had been made into an independent unit with National Park Service supervision? I can only speculate," Bonser said.

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