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Western group urges Biden to designate more monuments

Along with naming new national monuments in five states, the Mountain Pact wants to see two California monuments expanded.

By: Scott Streater | E&E Greenwire | 01/17/2024 01:34 PM EST



Part of the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument in California. A report urges President Joe Biden to expand this monument and another in the state, and to name others across the West. Sarah Mathews/Bureau of Land Management/Flickr

GREENWIRE | President Joe Biden should use his fourth year in office to designate six national monuments in five states, as well as expand two existing ones in California, urges a report from a group that works with Western community leaders on climate and public lands issues.

The [Mountain Pact report](#) released Wednesday says additional Western monuments would preserve federal lands considered sacred to Native Americans and important to outdoor recreation enthusiasts from numerous threats, including in one case industrial renewable energy development.

In some cases where the report urges presidential action, members of Congress have sponsored legislation that would accomplish the goals of a national monument designation or expansion, but has yet to be approved.

“National monuments are important to Western communities, and protecting public lands has always been a bipartisan effort and one that all Americans can celebrate,” said Anna Peterson, executive director of the Mountain Pact. “We continue to urge President Biden to use his authority under the Antiquities Act to protect more places with cultural and scientific significance as national monuments.”

The potential national monument designations the group wants to see include the Great Bend of the Gila in Arizona.

Arizona Rep. Raúl Grijalva, the ranking Democrat on the House Natural Resources Committee, in 2022 introduced [H.R. 8719](#), which addressed protections for the area but was not approved.

Grijalva’s “Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act” [would have established the 329,310-acre](#) Great Bend of the Gila National Conservation Area.

Grijalva said when unveiling it in August 2022 that his bill represented nearly a decade of work, “not just by me, but by the tribes and Indigenous communities who consider the Great Bend sacred.” He stressed he wanted the tribes to co-manage the site with federal land managers.

The Mountain Pact report does not cite Grijalva’s bill but says Biden should designate the area as a national monument.

“The public lands of the Great Bend of the Gila must be protected in a way that cognizes their importance to Tribes, their cultural and historical values, and the role of these lands in species survival, combating climate change, and redressing water scarcity,” the report says.

The Mountain Pact report also calls on Biden to establish the Chuckwalla National Monument and the Sáttítla-Medicine Lake Highlands National Monument, both in California, to protect lands sacred to Native Americans.

Designating the Sáttítla-Medicine Lake Highlands monument would appear to pit the Biden administration's priority of conserving sensitive public lands against its other priority of expanding commercial-scale renewable energy development on federal lands as part of its strategy to tackle climate change.

The report notes the urgency to protect the area "from the relentless threats from industrial energy development" — in this case geothermal power plants.

While Native American tribes such as the Pit River Nation and others in the region consider the Sáttítla and the Medicine Lake Highlands a "spiritual center," the report says the tribes for years "have fought to safeguard these ancestral lands from ongoing threats, including more than two dozen leases issued by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management for large-scale geothermal energy development."

The Mountain Pact report also cites threats to the region from transmission line projects, forest logging, and oil and gas development.

"Today we call upon the world to recognize the profound significance of our lands, to join us in their defense, and to work alongside us in ensuring permanent protection," said Yatch Bamford, chair of the Pit River Nation, in a statement. "Sáttítla must be protected and we call for its designation as a national monument, not just for our tribal citizens but for all of life that depends on it."

Biden has since late 2022 used his executive authority under the Antiquities Act of 1906 to designate five monuments covering more than 1.5 million acres — including two large monuments in Arizona and Nevada aimed at preserving landscapes considered sacred to Native American tribes.

The Mountain Pact report comes during a presidential election year in which Biden's conservation record has been celebrated by environmental groups.

A report in December by the left-leaning Center for American Progress calculated that the Biden administration has preserved through national monument designations and other moves, or taken steps to conserve, a total of 24 million acres during Biden's three years in office.

Biden's efforts prompted the outdoor recreation industry last year to organize campaigns to lobby the White House to protect even more federal landscapes. That included the Outdoor Industry Association joining a coalition of outdoors businesses such as REI Co-op, the North Face and Patagonia last summer to launch the [Mobilizing for Monuments](#) campaign to lobby Biden for more national monuments.

The Mountain Pact also calls for Biden to expand the existing San Gabriel Mountains National Monument and Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument, both in California.

The report also advocates for the establishment of the Delores Canyon National Monument in Colorado, the Mimbres Peak National Monument that is part of the biologically diverse Chihuahuan Desert in New Mexico, and the Owyhee Canyonlands in Oregon.

“Protective outcomes achieved under the Antiquities Act can ensure more equitable access to nature; address the climate crisis; restore America’s biodiversity and wildlife; and begin to reckon with historic and present injustices,” the report says. “Through the use of the Antiquities Act, some of the most important resources in our nation are preserved for the betterment of all. These are among the many reasons that our work concentrates on encouraging greater use of the Antiquities Act.”