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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act”

Mrs. FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, this month our Nation celebrates the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. To commemorate the anniversary of this landmark legislation, I want to take a few moments to highlight the historic importance of this law, and remind us of some of the work remaining to be done.

When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law on September 3, 1964, it became our unambiguous national policy “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

The legislation empowered those of us in Congress, with the ultimate approval of the President, to designate federal lands for protection as part of our National Wilderness Preservation System. It was a tremendous accomplishment, immediately placing some 1.2 million acres of wilderness in thirteen areas on national forest lands throughout my home state of California under statutory protection. And it protected another 8 million acres of land in other states.

But that was only the start. Over the ensuing four decades, Californians have welcomed acts of Congress that have expanded most of those initial areas. Today, those original thirteen wilderness areas have grown to 1.7 million acres of wilderness firmly protected by statute.

The Wilderness Act also required that numerous other areas of federal land be studied, with local public hearings,

leading to presidential recommendations for additional wilderness areas. Congress has enacted those proposals in California, beginning with the great San Rafael Wilderness near Santa Barbara in 1969—the first area added to the national wilderness system after the Wilderness Act became law.

Another early study focused on the 50,000-acre Ventana Primitive Area in the mountains along the central California coast above Big Sur – an area the U.S. Forest Service preserved in the 1930s. The study led Congress to establish the 98,000-acre Ventana Wilderness in 1969, with the leadership, among others, of California Senator Thomas Kuchel.

Since that time we have revisited this area in four additional laws, most recently when we passed and President George W. Bush signed a law in late 2002 further expanding this wilderness. As a result, the Ventana Wilderness now covers 240,000 acres.

Beyond the original Wilderness Act study areas, our California delegation has listened carefully to the diverse voices of the people of California. Year after year, we receive proposals for wilderness protection that come to us from ordinary citizens and organizations in our State, most often working in close consultation with the federal land managing agencies involved and our State government.

Many of these proposals have been enacted, particularly for lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land

Management. As a result of all this work, California now boasts 130 wilderness areas comprising 14 million acres.

These California wilderness areas offer a diverse spectrum of landscapes and ecosystems, recreational opportunities and scenic vistas, from the high peaks and forested valleys of the Sierra, to the extraordinarily wild deserts that Senator Alan Cranston and I fought to protect in the California Desert Protection Act of 1994 —one of my proudest achievements for the people of California.

In celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, I wish to particularly stress that the work of preserving California’s wilderness heritage has always been a bipartisan endeavor. In our State, we enjoy wilderness areas found in the congressional districts of both Democrats and Republicans, protected in laws signed by every President since this program began forty years ago — Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush.

The Act itself became law after eight years of congressional debate. Endorsed by the Eisenhower Administration and the administrations of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the Act was shaped by practical-minded people, mostly westerners. It is, as Senator Kuchel said during those Senate debates, “reasonable ... not extreme in any degree.”

Senator Kuchel insisted that the law not conflict with state water rights and that the act respect existing mining claims and established grazing uses. At the same time, Senator Kuchel reminded his colleagues that protecting wilderness watersheds is key to abundant, clean water supplies – the lifeblood of California’s ranching and agricultural sector, our thriving cities and towns, and the economic well-being of our entire nation.

Still, there is more wilderness to be protected and more work to be done. These days, federal lands that deserve a fair look by Congress are, in some cases, under threat from other kinds of use that are inconsistent with the preservation of wilderness. This is the kind of careful balancing Congress undertakes as we make these decisions.

This Congress has a great opportunity to preserve even more stunning wilderness by completing action on the Northern California Coastal Wild Heritage Wilderness Act that I have cosponsored with my colleague Senator Barbara Boxer. This bill has the strong and effective support of Representative Mike Thompson, in whose district every acre of its proposed wilderness areas is situated, and the support of numerous cosponsors, including California Representatives from both sides of the aisle.

Among the 300,000 acres this priority bill would protect is the 42,000-acre King Range Wilderness, a wild expanse on our California “lost coast” south of Eureka. Many of the proposals in this bill are based on agency recommendations or proposals by local citizens like the Humboldt County nurse who has been working to save the King Range for 20 years. These areas enjoy strong support, as wilderness, from local business owners in the area, from hunting and fishing enthusiasts, from dedicated backpackers to young parents hiking or backpacking to introduce their children—or their grandchildren—to nature at its most wild.

Similar worthy, bipartisan proposals await action for wilderness sponsored by our colleagues from New Mexico and Washington. And no less worthy is the proposed wilderness area designation for an area on the Caribbean National Forest in Puerto Rico—a wilderness area proposed by the U.S. Forest Service more than three decades ago.

As we consider these wilderness proposals, we can generally rely upon existing standards and interpretations of the Wilderness Act. Thanks to our predecessors we have a wealth of guidance in the legislative history of the Wilderness Act and the more than one hundred laws Congress has enacted since to protect additional lands.

Now, as we celebrate the fortieth year of the Wilderness Act, the preservation of our wilderness has never been more important. Population growth, especially in the western United States, is placing increased pressure on our public lands. That is why it was so critical that our leaders acted forty years ago and why it is urgent that we continue to preserve our Nation’s natural treasures today.

John Muir once said, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”

For forty years, the Wilderness Act has entrusted Congress and the American people with the means to preserve that beauty.