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Contact:

Joel Courtney

Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce

Phone: (575) 524-1968

Fax: (575) 527-5546

icourtney@lascruces.org

www.lascruces.org

Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce Board Reaffirms its Stance on Wilderness Bill

Las Cruces, NM, July 13, 2010 – The Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors' voted unanimously to re-confirm its prior position on SB 1689; especially as it pertains to homeland security. A review of the legislation, by the Chamber Board, was conducted following Senator Bingaman's recent modifications to the legislation. His modifications were made after a field hearing of the United States Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee was held in Las Cruces this past February.

Kiel Hoffman, Chairman, states, "While the Chamber commends the Senator for listening to concerns raised by the public and making modifications, we remain concerned that complete border security and law enforcement access are being denied unencumbered access by this legislation."

We commend the Las Cruces Sun News Editorial Board, which stated, on June 27th, the following: "*We urge Senator Bingaman to go as far as necessary to ensure that the Border Patrol will have complete and unfettered access to all areas along the border before putting the bill (SB 1689) up for final action.*" Complete and unfettered access means zero conditions. Unfortunately, SB 1689 still has conditions placed upon border security.

We strongly encourage the Senator to further modify the language that removes any and all barriers to entry, in all protected lands in Doña Ana County, for routine surveillance by our United States Border Patrol, United States Armed Forces and any local, state or federal law enforcement agency. Anything short of removing all conditions and barriers only serves to increase risks to our citizens and further create a negative image for those considering relocation to Doña Ana County to live, work and/or retire.

We further encourage the consideration of designating the Potrillos Mountain Complex as a National Conservation Area, still prohibiting development, versus Wilderness Designation. Attached is copy of stated position on all other aspects of SB 1689.

We know that other organizations in our community have taken an opposite view. We respect all viewpoints; however, we are deeply troubled by one local organization's apparent acceptance of significant funds from special interests groups to promote their position without full disclosure of doing so to its members. For the record, the Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce has not taken any money from any special interest groups to promote our position.

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Organ Mountains-Desert Peak Wilderness Act Position Paper

Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce Position

The Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce (GLCCC), representing more than 1,000 business entities within the Doña Ana County, New Mexico area, has concluded an exhaustive investigation of the protective land legislation that has been introduced by the honorable senators noted herein. Our conclusions are based on merit of the long term greater good of our county and the expanded impact of such legislation to our state and country.

Because of the importance of this legislation, it is imperative that the subject be expanded and detailed as it was concluded in our review process. We begin by simply stating that the Organ Mountains are and have always been the central focus of this community, and, as such, have unconditional support of our GLCCC for complete protection through federal land protection designations. GLCCC supports federal wilderness designation of the Organ Mountain WSAs and NCA as detailed in the legislation.

The GLCCC further concludes that there are two factors that any congressional action must recognize as being fundamental to the needs of this community. Those are national security and the freedom to grow our local economy. If these two factors are minimized or discounted, it would be difficult for the GLCCC to fully support this legislation. We believe these factors are extremely important and it is our intention that, as members of our congressional delegation, you are given the opportunity to understand the importance we place on our position.

With regard to National Security, the GLCCC undertook its own review of Homeland Security issues relative to the border. It is our conclusion that the circumstances that exist in Arizona and the Organ Pipe National Monument, specifically outlined in the Organ Pipe National Monument Park Service Resource Management Staff Study presented at the Border Lands Manager Meeting in 2004, are not an isolated phenomenon that exists without influence of designated wilderness. This same presented at the Border Lands Manager Meeting in 2004, are not an isolated phenomenon that exists without influence of designated wilderness. This same information was also conveyed and referenced in a letter from the Department of Interior legal counsel to the Honorable Rob Bishop in July this year. Additionally, the GLCCC sought expert testimony to validate the information in the study from retired Border Patrol leadership. On the contrary, if wilderness did not contribute to the grand scale of the illegal activity problem, it certainly provided the key to start the process. Similarly, we concluded it was not the border itself that has made the problem so immense. It was also the proximity of the nearest east west highway to the wilderness boundary, Mexican Highway 2, which made such a dangerous situation. Similarly, Highway 9 on the south side of the Potrillo Mountain Complex poses that same kind of threat.

Next, GLCCC views the Broad Canyon area as one of the most significant areas that contributes to the future growth in the county. We believe this area, unlike other areas, could accommodate rail and energy transmission needs of the future. More importantly, it is also the most significant watershed in all of Dona Ana County with the potential to contribute to the capture and storage of enhanced water supplies. It also poses the greatest risk to our county in terms of flood control and potential loss of life and property. Finally, it remains the only remaining destination of off road activities that are part of the lifestyle and economy of the area.

**Greater Las Cruces
Chamber of Commerce**

**760 W. Picacho Ave.
Las Cruces, NM 88005**

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relo@lascruces.org**

Finally, the GLCCC deferred in large part, to the wilderness audit process required by the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act and summarized in the DOI Record of Decision signed by then Secretary of Interior Manual Lujan. The GLCCC believes the inclusion of such lands not recommended by the DOI establishes a dangerous precedent. We believe the process that studies and establishes wilderness should not be marginalized by subjective assessments. For example, the DOI did not recommend the East Potrillos and Broad Canyon Areas for wilderness. If conditions have changed, and sometimes they do, we would hope that an official study to document the changes be the guiding mechanism. We do believe, however, where national and border security concerns are involved, exceptions to DOI recommendations and policy should be considered.

ACCORDINGLY, THE GREATER LAS CRUCES CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BOARD OF DIRECTORS UNANIMOUSLY SUPPORTS S.1689, THE ORGAN MOUNTAINS-DESERT PEAK WILDERNESS ACT, WITH THE FOLLOWING EXCEPTIONS:

1. Add language in the legislation that states flood control devices in the Organ Mountain NCA are allowed to be accessed, installed and modified as the City of Las Cruces growth demands.
2. The entire Potrillo Mountain Complex be removed from wilderness consideration and be designated an NCA with the need to incorporate management strategy that considers input from all public agencies and private property owners. The GLCCC STRONGLY believes that National Security concerns prevail beyond any other rationale when it comes to assessing areas adjacent to or in close proximity to the border. The importance of the national security issue must be elevated into the management plan for the area that allows for full and unencumbered access by the Border Patrol and other law enforcement. This includes the Aden Lava Flow Area, the Cinder Cone Area, the Whitethorn Area and the East and West Potrillos.
3. The removal of the entire Broad Canyon area from any alternative designation status. This is consistent with the DOI recommendation. GLCCC has reviewed this portion of the legislation in great detail and the impact of permanent withdrawal of this area poses great risk to the long term well being of the area. BROAD CANYON IS TOO IMPORTANT TO THE ECONOMIC WELL BEING OF THE COUNTY AND THE REGION TO IMPOSE ACCESS AND PLANNING RESTRICTIONS.
4. The Grazing language in Section 4 of S.1689 will do great damage to the ranching industry. The GLCC has reviewed and endorses the language presented as Exhibit D in Dr. Schickedanz's testimony. We do not want to lose these historical, family owned ranches which have meant so much to the Mesilla Valley. We must all be aware that in 2007 the United States produced less than half of its food supply for the first time. Congressional action cannot be imposed that accelerates that alarming statistic.

The GLCCC appreciates the consideration of our position. We respectfully request and STRONGLY ENCOURAGE members of the Senate Subcommittee on Energy and Natural Resources to conduct a field hearing in Dona Ana County to hear testimony from community residents and stakeholders on this very important issue. Wilderness designation is far too permanent to impose on this scale without scrutiny at every level, by all stakeholders, and all communities affected.

Signed September 22, 2009

John Hummer
Chairman of the Board
Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce

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