

## Feds scan North County for wilderness areas

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Swaths of San Diego's backcountry, including sections of the San Diego River watershed shown here, have been proposed for protection under the Wilderness Act in recent years. On the north edge of the county, efforts to protect the Beauty Mountain area are gaining traction. — John Gastaldo



Written by  
**Mike Lee**  
[/h5>](#)

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One of the nation's top public land officials is visiting San Diego County on Saturday to assess a potential wilderness area in the backcountry. It's a signal that more North County land could receive the nation's highest form of safeguards against development.

As part of the U.S. Department of the Interior's efforts to support local conservation efforts, deputy Secretary David Hayes plans visits to areas in New Mexico and California that have been proposed for wilderness designation by Congress.

"We view the secretary's current efforts as a positive indication that public lands resource protection is once again a priority in Washington," said Geoffrey Smith. He is the founder of [Wilderness4All](#), a network of people

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and organizations dedicated to promoting federal wilderness in California.

In June, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar told Hayes to seek input from members of Congress, state and local officials, tribes and federal land managers about lands that are good candidates for protection under the Wilderness Act. Hayes is preparing to deliver a report to the Salazar and Congress about the areas that his department believes can be the basis for a "bipartisan wilderness agenda" for the 112th Congress.

"The protection of America's wilderness for hunting, fishing, and backcountry recreation can be a unifying issue that mobilizes us to a common purpose," said Adam Fetcher, press secretary for the Interior Department. "Deputy Secretary Hayes is touring the Beauty Mountain Wilderness Area as part of Interior's commitment to support locally-driven conservation initiatives and working with members of Congress to advance their priorities for wilderness designations in their states and districts."

To qualify for wilderness status, lands must already be federal property controlled by the Forest Service, the National Park Service and other agencies. Wilderness parcels generally exclude roads, buildings and power lines. After an area is designated as wilderness, the agencies can no longer reconfigure land-use plans to include development such as off-road vehicle courses, backcountry resorts and logging operations.

The Beauty Mountain and Agua Tibia Act of 2011, sponsored by Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, would add more than 7,796 acres of public land to the existing Agua Tibia Wilderness and expand the Beauty Mountain Wilderness by an additional 13,635 acres.

Agua Tibia is enjoyed by thousands of hikers and equestrians each year who travel through it on the rugged Cutca Trail. It is managed by the Forest Service, an arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and isn't under Hayes' jurisdiction.

Beauty Mountain, operated by the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, is described by wilderness advocates as a "scenic jewel draped in chaparral, fascinating rock formations and oak woodlands."

Smith said Beauty Mountain represents "a crucial habitat linkage between the coastal mountains and the Anza-Borrego Desert."

"More than a decade of focused efforts by legions of volunteer wilderness proponents, and a number of key land purchases facilitated by government agencies working with key nonprofit conservation organizations (such as) The Conservation Fund and The Wilderness Land Trust has resulted in a ... public land resource that is ripe for designation as federal wilderness," Smith said.

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