

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands

By Monica Preston, President of the Willcox Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture

September 18, 2024

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 1479, the "Chiricahua National Park Act," introduced by Representative Juan Ciscomani.

My name is Monica Preston, and I have the honor of serving as the President of the Willcox Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture. I am deeply invested in the success of our region, and I am honored to stand before you today to speak to the importance of redesignating the Chiricahua National Monument as Chiricahua National Park. This designation is not only vital to the economic future of our region and the state of Arizona, but it also promises to enrich the quality of life for our local communities.

I am proud to be here in person with our City's Mayor, Mayor Laws, and Willcox City Manager Caleb Blaschke. Together, we have traveled across the country to show our full support for this critical piece of legislation, and we appreciate the Committee's attention to this issue.

The Chiricahua National Monument was first established by President Calvin Coolidge nearly 100 years ago, and this year, we celebrated the Monument's centennial. The "Wonderland of Rocks," as it's known, encompasses 12,000 acres of breathtaking landscapes featuring towering rock spires and balanced formations unique to the Chiricahua Mountains. The Monument also serves as a vital ecosystem, home to diverse species of flora and fauna, including migratory birds that draw nature enthusiasts from across the globe.

A National Park designation would raise the profile of Cochise County, both nationally and internationally, and bring much-needed tourism revenue to our rural economy. According to a report by Headwater Economics, National Monuments that have been redesignated as National Parks experienced an average 21 percent increase in visitation in the five years following designation. Additionally, total recreation visits to National Parks grew by 49 percent between 2000 and 2016, while National Monuments saw a decrease. For Willcox, which serves as the gateway to Chiricahua National Monument, this increase in tourism could mean a significant boost to our local economy, helping businesses flourish and creating jobs.

Willcox is also positioned at a critical juncture for transportation through southern Arizona. Interstate 10, one of the major transcontinental highways, runs directly through the City of Willcox, bringing an estimated 20,000 vehicles through our city every day. This traffic flow includes both commercial freight and tourism-related travel, making Willcox an essential

stopover for many visitors exploring Arizona's attractions. Additionally, the Amtrak train passes through Willcox, and we are working diligently to secure a permanent stop in the city, which would further boost local tourism and economic activity. Willcox is also the first city that visitors encounter when entering Arizona from New Mexico, further solidifying our role as a gateway to the state's natural and cultural attractions.

Tourism is Arizona's number one industry, playing a vital role in supporting the state's economy and enriching local communities. Regionally, Cochise County is a significant contributor to this industry, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors each year to iconic destinations like Tombstone, Kartchner Caverns, local museums, and Arizona State Parks. By redesignating Chiricahua National Monument as Chiricahua National Park, we will elevate the profile of the entire region, adding another must-see destination to the list of attractions that already draw visitors from across the country and around the world. This increase in tourism would bring further economic benefits, helping local businesses and improving the quality of life for residents in Willcox and throughout Cochise County. Willcox is a proud agricultural community with deep roots in farming and ranching. The area is known for a variety of agricultural operations, including livestock and cattle ranching, growing essential crops like alfalfa and hay, and producing nuts, particularly pecans. Generations of hardworking families in Willcox have built their lives around working the land, contributing not only to the local economy but also to Arizona's agricultural output. This strong agricultural foundation remains central to the community's identity and way of life, fostering a spirit of resilience and dedication to the land that continues to drive Willcox's growth and development.

Willcox has rallied around tourism as a cornerstone of our local economy, especially since the 2008 recession. Our small community is home to unique attractions, including Apple Annie's Orchard, the Rex Allen Museum, Tirrito Farm, and world-renowned birding and wine-tasting experiences. In fact, 75% of Arizona's grapes are grown in Willcox. Despite these strengths, many tourists overlook the Chiricahua National Monument, partly due to its current designation as a "Monument," which is often mistakenly associated with smaller sites or statues as shared with us by many visitors. A "National Park" designation would help change that perception, drawing more visitors to explore this extraordinary area. I can speak to this from personal experience. I own a winery and tasting room in downtown Willcox. Over the past 10 years, my winery has seen an increase in revenues by 500%, largely thanks to the growing tourism industry in the region. The tourism we receive directly supports me, my family, and our local economy. I firmly believe that the National Park designation will continue to strengthen local businesses like mine and provide new opportunities for growth. The City of Willcox was recently awarded an \$11 million grant to create a riparian area for birdwatching enthusiasts, further strengthening our position as a tourist destination. A National Park designation for Chiricahua would complement these efforts and bring even more visitors to our area.

Increased tourism benefits the entire community. Over the last five years, Willcox has seen a 67% increase in transient occupancy tax, or "bed tax," revenue, thanks to visitors coming to enjoy the region's attractions. Greg Hancock, the owner of the Sunset Inn, a family-owned and operated "mom and pop" hotel in Willcox, has seen firsthand the positive effects of tourism on his business. He notes, "People come from all over for birding, wine tasting, and to visit our local attractions. I always encourage them to explore the Chiricahuas. When they return, they are amazed by the stunning rock formations and natural beauty. They are often surprised at how much they would have missed had they not taken the time to visit. I believe that redesignating Chiricahua as a National Park will shine a brighter spotlight on this hidden treasure in our community, bringing in even more visitors who will support not just my business, but the entire local economy. It's a win for the community and a win for small businesses like mine."

More visitors also mean more revenue for our community. Mayor Laws has repeatedly spoke on the critical connection between local businesses and the city's economy: "In our community, business and city government go hand in hand. The revenues generated by our local businesses allow the city to provide essential public services such as public safety, road maintenance, and quality-of-life amenities like parks, libraries, and recreational facilities. This support not only benefits current residents but also makes our community more attractive to new businesses and talented employees, creating a sustainable cycle of growth and prosperity. Without these revenues, we simply wouldn't be able to maintain the ball fields, pools, libraries, and services for our youth and seniors that are so important to our community's well-being. A stronger tourism sector, boosted by the redesignation of Chiricahua as a National Park, would only enhance our ability to serve and support the people of Willcox."

We are not alone in this effort. We have received letters of support from Cochise County, the Southeastern Arizona Governments Association, Visit Tucson, and neighboring cities such as Bisbee, Douglas, Sierra Vista, Benson, and Huachuca City, all of whom understand the broader regional benefits that this name change will bring to their businesses and communities. Their letters are included as attachments.

Finally, I want to emphasize that this redesignation would not require additional federal funding, nor would it result in any need for taxpayer subsidies or increased taxes. The Chiricahua National Monument is already managed by the National Park Service, and the proposed change is merely a name designation. With an increase in visitation, however, we expect local businesses and the Park itself to see an increase in revenue, which would help support the services and attractions that make our community thrive. Specifically, the Park will benefit from increased revenue through its campground and RV hookups, as well as from sales at the visitor store.

In conclusion, on behalf of the Willcox Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture and the many business owners, public servants, and community members who support this legislation, I urge you to pass H.R. 1479 and redesignate Chiricahua National Monument as Chiricahua National Park. This change will strengthen our rural economy, enrich our communities, and help preserve the natural wonders of the Chiricahuas for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We hope you will support this important legislation.

Attachments:

- Pictures of Willcox
- Letters of Support: City of Willcox, Cochise County Government, Visit Tucson, Arizona Office of Tourism, City of Benson, Southeastern Arizona Government Association, Yaqui Hideout, Northern Cochise Community Hospital, D&D Sales Inc.









101 S. Railroad Ave. Ste B
Willcox, Arizona 85643
(520) 384-4271
mlaws@willcox.az.gov

September 11, 2024

The Honorable Juan Ciscomani
1429 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Congressman Ciscomani,

I am writing to thank you for introducing a bill to designate Chiricahua National Monument as a National Park.

As the Gateway to Chiricahua National Monument, seeing the name change to Chiricahua National Park is imperative to the growth of businesses in Willcox. Since the recession in 2008, Willcox has struggled to keep pace with other communities and attract new development. However, the community has rallied around tourism as the primary focus for our economy. Willcox is home to Apple Annie's, birding, wine tasting, Rex Allen Days, bicycling events and the Chiricahua Mountains. Businesses including hotels and restaurants rely on tourists visiting these spots to generate revenue.

During conversations with tourists at our visitor center, their first impression of a National Monument is often a statue or a site much smaller than a park. However, once we educate and share information about Chiricahua National Monument, they are amazed at the uniqueness, biodiversity and beauty of the area and make immediate plans to visit.

Attendance at Chiricahua National Monument has increased since the recession by 10%. We believe attendance will further increase if the name were to change to a National Park designation and would bring added revenue to small businesses in Willcox and Cochise County.

Respectively,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Laws". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael Laws
Mayor, City of Willcox



Cochise County Board of Supervisors

Public Programs...Personal Service
www.cochise.az.gov

ANN ENGLISH
Supervisor
District 2

September 12, 2024

The Honorable Mark Kelly
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Ste. B40B
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Mark Kelly,

I am writing in support of legislation to designate Chiricahua National Monument as a National Park. I strongly believe such a designation would help to strengthen the local and regional economies through area tourism.

A National Park designation would significantly raise the profile of Cochise County, both nationally and internationally, drawing visitors to the region. In a report, "Economic Impacts of National Monuments Redesignated National Parks," the independent, non-profit research organization Headwater Economics found that eight National Monuments designated as National Parks experienced an average 21 percent increase in visitors in the five years after designation. Additionally, total recreation visits in National Parks grew by 49 percent between 2000 and 2016, compared to a decrease of three percent in National Monuments.

Because of its unique geographical features and outstanding natural beauty, Chiricahua National Monument is a one-of-a-kind destination for Arizona tourism. Tourism is Arizona's number one industry and it plays a significant role in helping sustain the economies of communities throughout rural Cochise County. The Cochise County Tourism Council continuously works to attract new and repeat visitors to the region, and we believe this designation will make an important contribution to our ongoing goal.

I would like to thank you for introducing a bill to designate Chiricahua National Monument as a National Park and I enthusiastically enlist my support in moving this highly beneficial process forward.

Sincerely,

Ann English

Chairman

District 2

1415 Melody Lane, Building G
Bisbee, Arizona 85603
520-432-9200
520-559-3768 cell
520-432-5016 fax
aenglish@cochise.az.gov



SouthEastern Arizona Governments Organization

Serving our member governments and their constituents since 1972

September 11, 2024

Representative Juan Ciscomani
1429 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Subject: Letter of Support to re-designate the Chiricahua National Monument as the Chiricahua National Park

Dear Representative Ciscomani:

As you may know, the SouthEastern Arizona Governments Organization (SEAGO) is the regional planning agency for the four-county region of Cochise, Graham, Greenlee and Santa Cruz counties. SEAGO has been designated an Economic Development District (EDD) by the U.S. Economic Development Administration since 1991. As an EDD, SEAGO often supports policy initiatives that have the potential to enhance the economic prosperity of the region, and it's our understanding your office has introduced Chiricahua National Park Act to re-designate the Chiricahua National Monument (CNM) as the Chiricahua National Park.

In November 2016, the SEAGO Executive Board adopted Resolution No. 2016-06, which supported legislative efforts at that time to change the designation of the CNM to National Park status. The Executive Board supported H.R. 6190 because national parks attract visitors from all over the world, and recreational activities and tourism play a significant role sustaining and increasing the local and regional economy. Moreover, re-designating the CNM to National Park status was not expected not have any material budgetary or staffing impacts to the National Park Service.

Assuming the legislation you introduce does not propose substantive budgetary, staffing, or land use changes to the existing CNM, I'm confident the SEAGO Executive Board would continue to enthusiastically support efforts to re-designate CNM as the Chiricahua National Park.

Should you have any questions regarding this letter, please don't hesitate to contact me at (520) 432-5301 Extension 202, or kdennis@seago.org.

Sincerely,

Keith Dennis
Executive Director

SEAGO Member Entities

Cochise County
Benson
Bisbee
Douglas
Huachuca City
Sierra Vista
Tombstone
Willcox
Graham County
Pima
Safford
San Carlos
Apache Tribe
Thatcher
Greenlee County
Clifton
Duncan
Santa Cruz County
Nogales
Patagonia

SEAGO Main Office

- **Administration**
- **Community and Economic Development**
- **Transportation**

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Bisbee, AZ 85603
520-432-5301
520-432-5858 Fax

Area Agency on Aging Office

300 Collins Road
Bisbee, AZ 85603
520-432-2528
520-432-9168 Fax

www.seago.org



September 11, 2024

Dear Representative Ciscomani,

We are issuing this Letter of Support for the advancement of proposed legislation to change the designation of the Chiricahua National Monument to a National Park. The redesignation would give this geologic masterpiece the recognition it deserves and attract tourists to Cochise County, where recreational tourism plays a large role in helping to sustain the economies of our local communities.

Established as a National Monument by President Coolidge in 1924, this “Wonderland of Rocks” spans nearly 12,000 acres and features formations exclusive to the Chiricahua mountain range comprised of towering columns, spires, balanced and standing rocks. Chiricahua National Monument meets the necessary criteria to be elevated to a National Park designation, boasting breathtaking natural beauty, more than 1,200 species of flora and a diverse range of fauna as the area encompasses four different ecological biomes.

The modification in designation can be accomplished without imposition on taxpayers as the Chiricahua National Monument it is already managed by the National Park Service and would not require land-use changes, additional staffing, or a budget increase. It would, however, ensure the “Land of Standing Up Rocks” is able to be enjoyed by future generations of visitors from around the country and the world, gaining and national and international attention to the region.

We therefore support approval of the Chiricahua National Park Act.

Respectfully Signed,

Benson Mayor Joe A. Konrad



115 N. Church Ave., Suite 200
Tucson, Arizona 85701
VisitTucson.org

May 3, 2021

The Honorable Mark Kelly
Dirksen Senate Office Building
Suite B40B
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Kelly,

I am writing to express Visit Tucson's support for the Chiricahua National Park Act to designate Chiricahua National Monument as a National Park.

As you well know, the Chiricahua National Monument is a stunning landscape in the heart of southern Arizona. The "Land of Standing Up Rocks" is extraordinarily unique and attracts visitors from all over the world. Visitors can hike and explore this geological wonder, experience wildlife, and learn about the significant history of our region.

A National Park designation would undoubtedly raise the profile of Cochise County and southern Arizona, attracting more visitors to strengthen our local and regional economy.

Chiricahua National Monument is a unique and awe-inspiring national gem and should be a National Park. Thank you for introducing this important legislation to boost our local economy and honor a well-deserving natural and historical treasure.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Vanessa Bechtol".

Vanessa Bechtol
Vice President of Strategic Initiatives

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3661 E. Antelope Road
Pearce, AZ 85625
480-455-2388 / 602-317-0644
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September 9, 2024

Re: Upgrading Chiricahua National Monument to a National Park

To Whom It May Concern,

Regarding the possibility to change the Chiricahua National Monument to a National Park, we fully support that move. We are a local ranch homestead with Lavender Farm and Bed and Breakfast and would greatly appreciate and support having a National Park in our area. I think it would bring a needed boost to the local economy, increase our business and expand local tourism. The Chiricahua Monument is a spectacular treasure and does not seem to us to get the visibility and appreciation it should have.

I certainly hope someday soon it joins the ranks of our other National Parks!

Sincerely,

Bob Gleason-Moore, Owner



September 10, 2024

Respected Decision Makers,

I am writing to you with enthusiastic support to encourage Chiricahua National Monument to be named a National Park. This incredibly scenic area is home to many hiking trails and truly unbelievable rock formations. In my humble opinion, it is a collection of geologic marvels nestled among the Chiricahua Mountain range and well deserves recognition as a National Park.

I represent our local community hospital, and it is with unanimous board support I write this letter. Not only would this enhanced status give due recognition to the treasure we hold dear, but it would also provide additional tourism to our area. The economic benefits to the community would be well received. Clinically, we stand ready and able to care for those who may require our services.

We respectfully request consideration for this modification to name the Chiricahua National Monument as a National Park.

Sincerely,

Mo Sheldon FACHE, CEO

D & D Sales Inc
Dunagan Trucking
410 E. Maley St.
Willcox, Arizona 85643
September 9, 2024

To whom it may concern.

The change of Chiricahua Monument to a National Park would be a tremendous asset to our town of Willcox and also to Cochise County.

The impact on my own business might be minimal but it would be a huge asset to our community, and county. My business depends on the agriculture success of our farmers and ranchers. From corn, cotton, cattle, alfalfa, pistachio, pecans, to commercial gardens.

Willcox is the closest town to the Monument and would most assuredly benefit from the re-branding of our beautiful mountains.

I encourage you to approve this proposed action.

Thank you,

Carol Dunagan
Dunagan Trucking