

Ken Salazar calls for Fort Ord national monument

Monterey County: Interior chief calls BLM land 'crown jewel'

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Bureau of Land Management Fort Ord Manager Eric Morgan, left

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar ended a visit to Monterey County on Friday with a call to President Barack Obama to designate Fort Ord as a national monument.

Conducting an informal poll of the audience in a town-hall type meeting in Marina, Salazar described the designation as the best way to conserve the coastal lands in perpetuity.

"Our best places in the United States ... are those where you have the kind of united community support that I see here today," Salazar told his audience after nearly 100 hands were raised in favor of the designation.

Salazar spent the morning in Sacramento signing an agreement with Gov. Jerry Brown to expand a state and federal partnership to develop renewable energy projects in California.

By afternoon, he was touring the vast Bureau of Land Management acreage on the former military base that hugs Monterey Bay.

Atop a rise with spectacular views known as Wildcat Ridge, Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, pointed out to Salazar the surrounding natural attractions, from Pinnacles National Monument to the east, Los Padres National Forest to the south, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary to the west and the future Fort Ord Dunes State Park below the red-rock hilltop.

Jokingly calling the region the Disneyland of the outdoors, Farr said, "There is more diversity of outdoor activity (here) than anyplace else in the United States."

Farr noted the area's proximity to Salinas — "the largest agricultural city in the country and home to more farmworkers than anywhere else" — and told Salazar the story of a Salinas boy who took part in a bike race on the land. The boy had disappeared from the group. Fellow bikers found him atop Wildcat Ridge, staring at the sweeping view of the Pacific.

"He stopped right here in tears ... because he saw the ocean for the first time," Farr said. "That's why we're doing this."

Although Salazar was missing his signature cowboy hat, the Colorado native appeared at home on the ridge in cowboy boots and a western belt buckle. Gesturing to the landscape around him, he said the area is "a crown jewel that will be around when all of us are gone."

The small entourage included Deputy Interior Secretary David J. Hayes, BLM director Bob Abbey and Marina Mayor Bruce Delgado, who is also a Bureau of Land Management botanist.

The bureau is in charge of about 7,200 acres of maritime chaparral lands transferred from the Department of Defense in 1996. Once military ordnance cleanup is complete, the bureau will take control of an additional 7,000 acres.

The transfer is expected to be complete by 2019, BLM officials said.

After the tour, Salazar's group was joined at the Carpenters Union Local 605 building in Marina by members of the public and California Secretary for Natural Resources John Laird.

The so-called "listening session" was part of Obama's America's Great Outdoors Initiative, which supports local efforts to preserve and protect natural and historical places.

Salazar urged local preservation groups to communicate their support of national monument status to Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. The designation would afford more protection for wildlife, but somewhat less funding and protection than a national park.

BLM spokeswoman Erin Curtin said even existing plans to transfer more acreage to the bureau will raise Fort Ord's profile and draw visitors to the area's 86 miles of roads and trails that can be used for hiking, biking and other recreational activities.

Before he left to catch a plane, Salazar asked how many in the room wanted "this land protected and preserved in perpetuity."

He was met with resounding applause.

"This is one of those places," he said, "where you are as close as you can come to having heaven on earth."

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