

Designating Castner Range as a National Monument: The Regional Picture

The story of El Paso, Las Cruces and the Mesilla Valley is inextricably connected to a complicated human history of migration, and the sharing of culture, language, and natural resources, most notably, surface water from the Rio Grande and groundwater from the Mesilla Bolson Aquifer. Prior to the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, this land included the border between Mexico and the United States and is closely connected to neighboring Cd. Juárez. Tourists and visitors from Cd. Juárez and northern Chihuahua are frequent visitors to El Paso and the Mesilla Valley, where they explore places like the Franklin Mountains State Park (FMSP) and the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks (OMDP) National Monument, as well as Castner Range.

Castner Range is home to 11 square miles of West Texas beauty and forms a picturesque backdrop to the largest bilingual, binational workforce in the Western Hemisphere.¹ Its vast history and historical significance date back thousands of years and, as El Paso is home to one of our nation's largest foreign-born constituencies, the history continues to this day. The Castner Range national monument designation is supported by the El Paso community, Texas conservation groups and national environmental leaders.

The designation of Castner Range as a National Monument will connect recreation for tourists and visitors, add economic vitality to the borderland, and allow residents of the area to share in the history and natural wonders of this expansive mountain chain.



Castner Range - photo by Scott Cutler

¹ El Paso, Texas, USA & Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico

A Castner Range Designation is a Commitment to America the Beautiful

In May 2021, the Biden Administration announced the [America the Beautiful initiative](#), with the goal of conserving 30% of the U.S. by 2030, an inclusive and bold vision for locally-led efforts to restore and conserve America's lands, water, and wildlife. Castner Range National Monument is a perfect fit with this initiative.

Castner Range dovetails with the America the Beautiful initiative as a locally-led, voluntary conservation effort for over 50 years. The creation of Castner Range as a national monument would connect open spaces and offer safe outdoor opportunities in a city of over 800,000 people, many with limited access to natural landscapes.

Over time, Castner Range will increase access for outdoor recreation. In addition, having a national monument in El Paso will be a significant investment in the area's economy. Siglo Group, a land use planning consulting firm, study found that more than 1.6 million acres of lands put into conservation are estimated to provide more than \$1 billion in benefits to Texas taxpayers each year. What is more, \$1 invested in conservation yields up to a \$9 return in investment. Given these statistics, Castner Range can become part of the healthy natural system that protects our water supply and will provide homes to our area's wildlife, while also benefiting the region's economy. In the U.S. approximately 12,000 wildlife species need conservation assistance to avoid the threat of extinction; Castner Range is home to several of these, like the Pin Cushion cacti, and is the only place in west Texas with massive blooms of Mexican Gold poppies.

As stated in the America the Beautiful initiative, the nature crisis is exacerbated by climate change, which is rapidly altering ecosystems on land and water. Castner Range can help in this long-term effort by keeping the land open for water recharge and maintaining a cooler urban setting through the assurance of not cementing or building on Castner Range. To illustrate the connection to the population growth in a real-time visual for the growth in El Paso since 1980's, look at this [video](#) to see the population growth and how it has increased in surrounding counties. An imbalance between the developed and natural landscapes has risen, resulting in disproportionate amounts of land being urbanized, without adequate preservation of natural and working lands. Most Americans used to live in rural areas and small towns; but now, 85 percent live in urban and suburban environments, where manicured parks are typically the only place to experience nature.

El Pasoans see firsthand the inequitable access to the outdoors in El Paso, Texas. We are out in the community, at school career days, and working with people of all ages where we can ask where they go to connect with nature, hike or explore their natural surroundings. When asked, most El Pasoans have never been to any natural areas even though most of the city is only 30 to 40 minutes from FMSP, OMDP, Hueco Tanks State Park, Wyler Tram in the Franklin Mountains, Resler Canyon Nature Preserve, Lost Dog and Knapp Land natural areas and endless other locations. El Paso is a community with disproportionately less access to nature's benefits and clean air than other communities in Texas and the nation. Again, as stated in America the Beautiful initiative, we see that these same communities in El Paso also shoulder a disproportionate share of the costs of nature's decline, including more pollution, and encroaching industrial development.

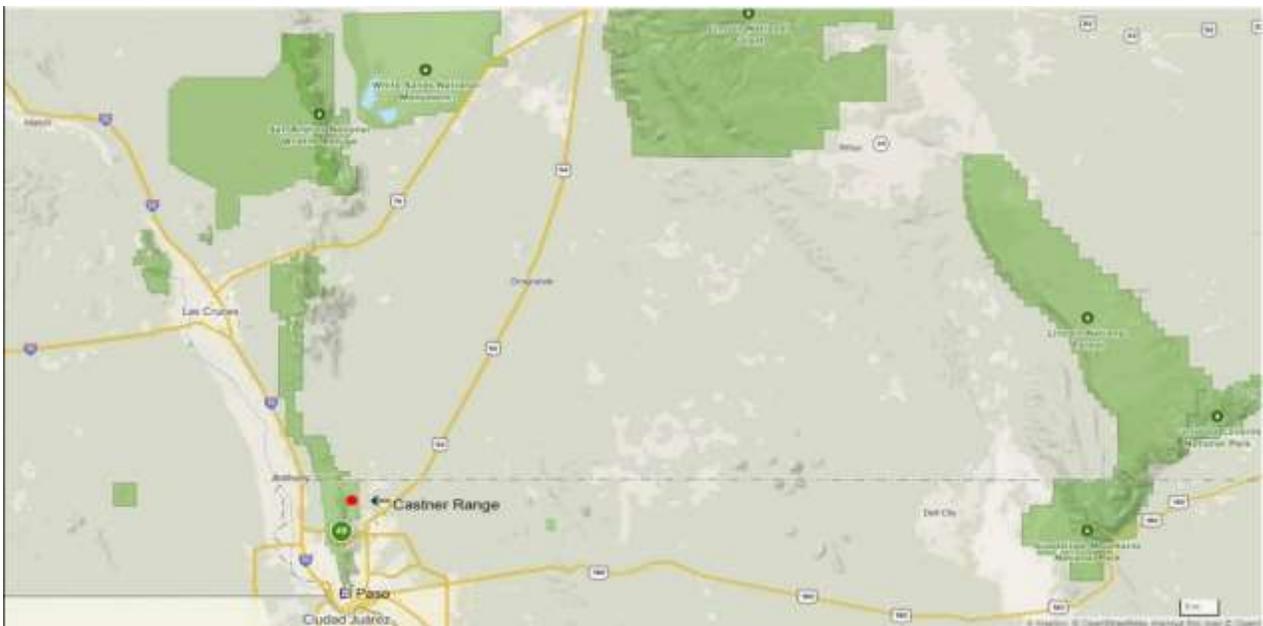
Castner Range Designation Expands Open Public Lands in the Region

El Paso is moving to preserve hundreds of acres of undeveloped open space for the benefit of those who live here – humans *and* wildlife. El Paso has the great blessing of the FMSP, nearly 25,000 acres, comprising the largest urban park in the country. The FMSP’s size is due in part to the transfer—by El Paso Water—of 12,000 acres (about half the park’s total acreage) to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Our State Park benefits from the city’s and county’s support, as demonstrated in the 2015 approval by the state legislature of a new State-Park visitor center. The El Paso delegation, supported by one individual’s \$40,000 lobbying donation, fought hard for this long-promised center. The same political forces—federal, state, county and city—strongly support designating Castner Range as a national monument, as well as preserving the adjacent mountain lands.

The OMDP National Monument earned its designation in 2014 from the Obama Administration using the Antiquities Act. One of the largest across the West, the OMDP encompasses 496,330-acres in the Mesilla Valley which surround the City of Las Cruces, El Paso, and southern Doña Ana County. The southern end of the Organ Mountains connects to the northern end of the Franklin Mountains and, together, they form a distinct mountain chain that is home to several endemic species and forms an important wildlife corridor for species such as mule deer, mountain lions, javelina, and more. These two mountain ranges, which include Castner Range, contain a variety of unique geological, paleontological and archaeological resources.

The Franklin Mountains, OMDP and surrounding open space provide opportunities for hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, and bird watching. The region is also a popular destination for birdwatchers with its extensive habitat, including a variety of endangered and threatened species such as the southwestern willow flycatcher, and the wood stork.



Location of Federal and State Protected Lands in the El Paso/Las Cruces Region Franklin Mountains State Park is to the west of Castner Range in El Paso, Texas. The Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument is to the east and west of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Animals and Plants on Castner Range

Our natural landscapes not only provide us with places of great beauty, but they also play a critical role in providing habitat for wildlife along with clean water, fresh air and recreational opportunities. These are important community components that companies look for when considering whether to relocate to the El Paso region.

Taxa	Patch Area
 Plants	5 to \geq 250 ac
 Invertebrates	50 sq ft to \geq 2.5 ac
 Reptiles and Amphibians	3 to \geq 35 ac
 Grassland Birds	12 to \geq 135 ac
 Waterfowl	\geq 12 ac
 Forest Birds	5 to \geq 95 ac
 Small Mammals	2.5 to \geq 25 ac
 Large Mammals	40 ac to \geq 2 sq mi
 Large Predator Mammals	3.5 to \geq 850 sq mi

(From Conservation Buffers, Design Guidelines for Buffers, Corridors, and Greenways. 2008).

Castner Range is home to three distinct and vulnerable vegetation zones, referred to as communities. The mountainous areas—which include land within yards of the Franklin Mountains’ highest elevation (North Franklin peak at 7,192 feet above sea level)—are characterized by the Agave-Lechuguilla Community. The Alluvial Fan-Creosote Bush Community is found on the Range’s numerous alluvial fans. Its vegetation is characterized by the presence of creosote bush, white thorn acacia, tarbush, Spanish sword yucca. The third Community (Draw-Yucca Grassland) is found in the Range’s lowest elevations where the soil is generally deeper—up to 50 centimeters—and has greater silt and clay content than elsewhere. At these lower elevations you may see vast expanses of Mexican gold poppies, contrasting with the desert environment.



Castner Range - photo By Mark Clune



Mexican gold poppies on Castner Range - photo By Mark Clune

These various habitats provide diverse wildlife with a wonderful place to live. This includes 12 common mammals; 62 bird species; 20 types of lizards (including such exotics as the Chihuahuan spotted whiptail, the Southwestern earless lizard and the Texas horned lizard), and 29 types of snake (among them the Trans-Pecos rat snake, the Texas night snake, the western coachwhip and the western diamondback rattlesnake). Around twenty wildlife or plant species listed as “threatened or endangered” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may be present on the Range, including the Sneed’s pincushion cactus and the desert night-blooming cereus.



Checkered whiptail lizard
Above Photos by Richard Love



desert cottontail



western desert tarantula

“Habitat fragmentation caused by developments in the Franklin Mountains of El Paso adversely affects the habitat needs of a wide variety of wildlife including large mammals that travel long distances in search of food and mates and numerous species of nesting and migratory birds,” says **Rick LoBello, Education Curator at the Paso Zoo and Botanical Gardens**. “The Castner Range is an important part of the Franklin Mountains Wildlife Corridor. This corridor connects wildlife habitat in the Southwest Borderland Region between the Franklins and Organ Mountains to the north and the Franklin Mountains and the mountains of northern Chihuahua, Mexico to the south. The entire mountain region on both sides of the border is also part of the North American Central Flyway used by birds protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.”

Rain at Castner Range

In El Paso, rain is not a common occurrence. Its rarity makes it a novel and thrilling experience for us who live in a city that has more than 300 days a year without rain. But there is another element to El Paso rain that helps with the accretion of our local cultural experience. The creosote bush secretes oil that permeates the El Paso air when the rain comes and gives the rain a scent association that all El Pasoans share. This kind of shared experience, specifically tied to a locality, is an important building block of culture.

As is true of most of America’s West, water remains the most rare and precious resource for those who call Castner Range home. El Paso County’s rainfall is often heaviest in the Franklin Mountains and especially on their eastern side, where the Range is located. It is no accident that it features a dozen natural canyons, arroyos (‘gullies, washes’) and alluvial fans efficiently transporting run-off from the heights into the large underground Hueco Bolsón. These open lands on Castner Range help manage flooding. Siglo Group, in partnership with the Texas Land Trust Council, states that every \$1 spent on flood risk reduction can

decrease disaster costs by \$4, in addition to removing harmful materials. The land's natural habitats help to store and slowly release water over time.

We need both land and water to ensure smart and sustainable growth. El Paso Water manages thousands of acres of land in El Paso County. They purchase open spaces with a stormwater function to decrease the flood risk, and it partners with the City and nonprofits to provide more recreational opportunities by granting the use of its lands for trailhead sites. By conserving Castner Range, we also conserve the drainage "systems" that nature has created over the centuries. This conservation will reduce the volume of water that would otherwise flood city streets and will increase the amount of water that seeps into aquifers underground.

Castner Designation is the Beginning of Tomorrow

To look at tomorrow we first need to look at yesterday and see why designating Castner Range as a national monument is a community-led effort with no opposition. The things we learn to appreciate because of our particular environment are things people from outside of El Paso might not understand, but these are exactly what bring us closer to each other as a community. We can share the joy and excitement that comes with the abrupt infusion of color the poppy bloom always brings to the landscape. Much like the smell of the rain, the significance of the spring poppy bloom on Castner Range ties our community together through a shared experience.

Our organizations believe a monument designation for Castner Range would offer protection from future development and represent the Biden Administration's commitment to preserve the cultural, historical, scientific and environmental connections to all parts of our nation, including one of our most underserved areas in the Lone Star State. Further, it would afford our community a significant step toward providing expanded conservation education to marginalized communities who disproportionately bear the brunt of climate impacts and traditionally have less access to nature.

Castner Range is America's Borderland

The lands surrounding Castner Range and El Paso are not only a significant area from a biodiversity and cultural standpoint, but also hold countless opportunities for outdoor recreation. For example, Castner Range is just 10 miles from the region's largest airport, the El Paso International Airport, which serves millions of passengers each year. It is also just two hours from three National Parks and two National Monuments.

Castner Range lies alongside already-established trails for hiking and camping within the FMSP to world class climbing just 45 minutes away at Hueco Tanks State Park. Castner Range's rich land connects today's economic opportunities with yesterday's stories. This extends beyond El Paso and into New Mexico— "The Land of Enchantment"—where other breathtaking landscapes and outdoor recreation opportunities exist.

Each year, millions of people visit New Mexico's south-central region to hike, climb, bike and camp in the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument and explore and learn about the fascinating geologic history of the land at White Sands National Park and at the Prehistoric Trackways National Monument. Two hours to the east, families from across the country travel to Guadalupe Mountains National Park, which straddles the Texas and New Mexico Border and just a mile east of downtown El Paso, is the Chamizal National Memorial.

PROTECTING OUR PUBLIC LANDS IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

ORGAN MOUNTAINS-DESERT PEAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT

The jagged **ORGAN MOUNTAINS** were a landmark for travelers on the Camino Real.

DESIGNATION of the **NATIONAL MONUMENT** will be good for **THE ECONOMY**

 **\$7.4 Million** annually in new economic activity

 **88** new jobs created

\$562,000  in additional state & local tax revenue

Source: <http://bit.ly/1aWFme>



Extensive mountain biking, climbing, horseback riding and other recreational uses make the **ORGAN MOUNTAIN-DESERT PEAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT** particularly important to fast-growing Las Cruces and Doña Ana County.

PEOPLE WHO LIVE HERE Favor the National Monument



83% of Doña Ana County residents support designation

Voters across New Mexico come together on this position regardless of location or political affiliations.

Source: Sept 2012 poll of 500 residents of Doña Ana County

The **DOÑA ANA MOUNTAINS** are an archeological, cultural, and recreational gem mere miles from Las Cruces.



PROTECTING public land creates local **JOBS**

297% increase in jobs

for western non-metro counties with at least 20% protected lands

Western non-metro counties with no protected lands saw only 83% increase in jobs for the same period.

Source: <http://bit.ly/1j21jle>

The **GREATER POTRILLO MOUNTAINS** have unparalleled significance to the large local and regional sportsmen community due to the outstanding populations of quail, mule deer, and javelina.

The **SIERRA DE LAS UVAS MOUNTAINS COMPLEX**, including the Robledo Mountains, are rich in diverse historical sites, petroglyphs, and wildlife.



Learn more at www.organmountains.org



PUBLIC LANDS = TOURISM

40% Increase in visitors in less than one year

since the designation of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument in northern New Mexico.

Source: BLM Taos Field Office

Statistics showing benefits of Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument to Las Cruces, New Mexico. The same benefits would be expected for the El Paso region with the designation of Castner Range as a National Monument

Castner Range Designation Provides Special Places and Wide-Open Spaces for Future Generations

It is important to note, when ecosystem services are lost, communities pay. The City of El Paso encompassed 25 square miles in 1950. By 2012, it had grown to 255 square miles. Over roughly the last two decades, El Paso County has lost 11,755 acres of natural area to development; this is just over 18 square miles. To put that in context, it's more than 1.5 times the size of the proposed Castner Range National Monument and about half the size of the Franklin Mountains State Park.

While we continue to advocate strongly for the designation of Castner Range as a national monument, our conservation organizations are also working on behalf of future generations who will benefit from the protection of other local areas of immeasurable beauty and vulnerable Chihuahuan Desert natural areas.



Coronado High School students near the Museum of Archaeology involved with an active-learning experience alongside Castner Range

Castner Range Designation: Led By The People, Conserved For The People

We all have a shared responsibility to conserve and educate the community about our natural world: to use what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today.

Conserving Castner Range as a national monument is an investment in our local economy, since tourists are drawn to the region for the mountains, the Rio Grande, our parks and our natural areas. Castner Range National Monument will safeguard significant local natural and cultural features, improve wildlife habitat and natural habitat connectivity, address the health of our regional watershed, contribute to the local economy of our communities, expand understanding of ecosystem services' valuation, and ultimately, a Castner Range National Monument will help preserve for our nation a part of our natural and cultural history that everyone can be proud of.

Appendix A

As our county's population continues to grow, we are working to conserve other lands that are near and adjacent to Castner Range and the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument in order to enhance public access to wild lands. These regional land preservation projects build on a Castner Range National Monument designation

Regional Projects

Organ Mountains-Desert Peak National Monument: These lands are currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Within the Monument are ten wilderness areas that were established when S. 47, the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act of 2019 was signed into law in March 2019. At 179,846 acres, a complex of six wilderness areas centered on the Potrillo Mountains southwest of Las Cruces now represents the fourth-largest Wilderness complex in New Mexico, after the Gila (559,311 acres), the Aldo Leopold (203,548 acres) and the Pecos Wilderness areas (221,806 acres). In all, the Monument encompasses close to 500,000 acres of land in three units. The lands are a diverse mix of Chihuahuan desert grasslands, sky island peaks, seasonal streams, rare native cacti, dramatic canyons, and historical remains.

Las Cruces: This city (New Mexico's second largest) is located in the south-central/ southwestern part of the state where public lands offer an amazing diversity of outdoor recreation opportunities. The BLM's Las Cruces District Office manages 5.4 million acres of public land and over 10 million acres of Federal mineral estate from the western side of the Guadalupe Mountains to the Arizona border, and from Sierra County and the southern edge of the Gila National Forest to the Mexican border. These public lands include majestic, scenic mountain ranges jutting from the desert floor and towering over the surrounding desert. The confluence of the Chihuahuan desert, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Plains, the Sonoran desert, and the Sierra Madre make this area the most biologically and recreationally diverse region of New Mexico.

Red Sands: Once an ancient sea 34 million years ago, this pristine area has turned into the beautiful surrounding zone that we now call Red Sands. Located 30 miles northwest of downtown El Paso, it is approximately 21 square miles in size and currently owned by the General Land Office and private owners. The land features sand dunes, hundreds of serpentine trails, and small hills comprised of compact dirt and rock and offers scenic views found nowhere else in the region. This land should be protected forever.

Hueco Tanks State Park is only 30 miles from downtown El Paso. For thousands of years, people have trekked to these rock hills in far west Texas around the Hueco Mountains and the area surrounding them. Indigenous travelers came for the rainwater pooled in natural rock basins or *huecos* ("WAY-coes"). Visitors today marvel at the imagery left by those ancient peoples. With the increase of development on the private lands around Hueco Tanks, the historic and cultural lands are disappearing and will be lost forever. We need to work to ensure our past is not lost.

Rio Grande River: The river runs 80 miles along the edge of El Paso County. Along the river there is a multi-use trail that has been started and when completed will run from county line to county line. The north end of the trail is built and used daily by people walking strollers, running, bike riding and birding. The Riverpark Trail segment of the Paso del Norte Trail is a 10.5-mile long concrete trail. The Playa Drain Trail segment of the Paso del Norte Trail will eventually connect Ascarate Park to Capistrano Park via an 8.5-mile long shared-use path. This path along with the connector trails join areas such as the Rio Bosque, Cement Lake and the Keystone Botanical Gardens. This trail is a perfect fit for the fluctuating water that runs down the Rio Grande. The land is open for flood control, while the river provides habitat for nesting and a resting place for migrating birds. In turn, people kayak in the river and fish there, from riverbanks or boats. Despite the installation of these trails, there's been an increase in farms and other developments alongside the river. Such changes will result in increased flooding as well as a loss of a way of life. These river lands need to be saved today to ensure that we have access to the Rio Grande in the future.

Franklin Mountains State Park is nearly 27,000 acres (about 40 square miles) with over 100 miles of trail. Both the Texas horned lizard (a Texas Parks and Wildlife-listed threatened species) and the endangered Sneed's pincushion cactus inhabit these lands. The **Wyler Aerial Tramway** at the state park is on 195.742 acres of rugged mountain land and rock formations on the east side of the Franklins themselves. Surrounding the state park lands, El Paso Water owns and manages over 6,000 acres of land that one day we hope can be added to what has been and is being conserved.

Lost Dog: The Lost Dog possesses a combination of diverse plant and animal habitats, spectacular scenery and a suite of cultural features on its 1,006 acres of land. The arroyos on Lost Dog provide corridors for wildlife and for water flow during rains. Most people know Lost Dog for its many multi-use trails—over seven miles of them. **Knapp Land:** This 353-acre land was up for development but in 2018 was bought by the City of El Paso with stormwater funds. In 2021 the City and the Frontera Land Alliance placed a conservation easement on the land, which borders Castner Range on the south and adds a wildlife connector to the lower slopes of the Franklins. All of Knapp Land is part of the Franklin Mountains, a tilted fault-block mountain range composed of mainly sedimentary rock with some igneous intrusions. While Knapp Land is permanently protected by a conservation easement, work remains to be done. We note (for example) a heavy misuse by hikers, from walking off trail to leaving dog waste and trash behind. We need to create a robust regional plan to educate all on how fragile the desert is and how everyone can help.



Above are participants and visitors to Poppies Festivals held on Castner Range