

Park service water proposal draws interest

by Kelly Donovan
Staff Writer

BARSTOW -- An estimated 75 people from all over the region gathered in Barstow Monday evening to give their input on the controversial topic of artificial watering sources in the Mojave National Preserve.

The National Park Service's meeting at the Holiday Inn Express & Suites was part of the public scoping process for a proposal to bring former ranchers' well systems back online.

Hunters and environmentalists generally disagree on the artificial water issue.

The 12 wells would furnish water that would be accessible to a variety of animals, most likely via wildlife drinkers, Larry Whalon, chief of resources for the Mojave National Preserve, said.

Hunting groups have been pushing for the preserve to restore the water that the ranchers' wells had provided until the ranchers moved in recent years and removed their well equipment.

However, attendees said the push to restore the well systems isn't just about providing water for game to benefit hunters.

"It's for the preservation of the wildlife that's out there," said Walt Zielinski, a 71-year-old Apple Valley resident who attended the meeting.

Ken Schwartz, Safari Club International's state governmental affairs and communications manager, said his group and the other supporters of the water proposal want to help more than just game animals.

Animals that can't even be hunted will benefit from restored water sources, he said.

The Park Service initially was going to convert some former well systems into guzzlers, but the agency faced opposition from environmental groups and backed off on the plan this spring.

Environmental groups fault artificial water sources for attracting ravens, a predator of the desert tortoise, and they blame guzzlers for the deaths of tortoises due to the reptiles getting trapped in them.

Last year, the Park Service cleaned more than 30 guzzlers in the preserve and discovered in them the remains or shells of 13 tortoises.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility filed a lawsuit in March asking that the guzzler proposal be reviewed under the National Environmental Policy Act.

In early April, the Park Service rescinded its prior approval of the guzzler plan and agreed to move ahead with environmental review of the artificial water source issue.

Unlike guzzlers -- watering holes that animals must walk into -- wildlife drinkers are raised off the ground and wouldn't pose a threat to desert tortoises, Whalon said.

Still, Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity, didn't attend the meeting but said in a phone interview Monday that his group doesn't want the preserve run like a game farm.

"We support hunting on the preserve, but it needs to be managed consistently with the values of a national preserve," he said. "This isn't an issue of water versus no water. It's about using these agricultural wells that are supposed to stay off."

Patterson said his group would like to see a preserve-wide environmental impact statement addressing water, with an emphasis on the restoration of natural springs.

He also said there's an abundance of water in the preserve now, and he'd like to see the Park Service catch up on its maintenance backlog of existing guzzlers before moving ahead with any additional artificial watering sources.

One hunter who attended the meeting, 61-year-old Ray Osgood of San Diego County, said he's strongly in favor of getting the wells back online, and prefers wildlife drinkers over guzzlers.

Many birds can access drinkers better than they can guzzlers, he said.

Hunters' and sportsmen's groups represented at the meeting included Safari Club International, Quail Unlimited, Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep and the California Deer Association.

Safari Club International supports the restoration of the 12 wells, Schwartz said.

"Those animals have relied on (the wells) for over 100 years," Schwartz said. "They've come to know that's where they can go to get a drink. When that's taken away, it's a shock to their system."

The Park Service is preparing an environmental assessment document for the proposal, and a draft of the document will be available by Sept. 1.

Kippy Poulson, a 61-year-old Needles resident who supports the restoration of the well systems, couldn't attend Monday's meeting but said in a phone interview that she's hoping the Park Service will install wildlife drinkers.

The drinkers Poulson would like to see draw from an underground storage system, and they would benefit wildlife like bighorn sheep, deer, foxes and quail.