

Pronghorns, the second-fastest land animal in the world, could be re-introduced in the East Mojave

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The antelope-like pronghorns that once thrived in the California desert could make a comeback.

Federal and state officials are working on a plan to reintroduce the animals -- second only to cheetahs for speed -- to a remote plateau in the East Mojave, near the California-Nevada border south of Interstate 15.

Pronghorns, once plentiful, were hunted out of the region and haven't been seen there in nearly 100 years.

[Story continues below](#)



California Wilderness Coalition

The area of the Castle Mountains Mine, a former goldmine that is being restored to a more natural state, may be sold to the U.S. government and included in the Mojave National Preserve. The plan includes returning pronghorns -- a fast-moving hoofed mammal -- to the area.

The reintroduction could get a boost if Sen. Dianne Feinstein's desert protection bill pending before Congress is adopted.

The legislation, among many provisions, would add the Castle Mountains and surrounding area -- nearly 30,000 acres that includes the former pronghorn range -- to the Mojave National Preserve. The land is overseen by the U.S. **[Bureau of Land Management](#)**.

The proposal has drawn opposition from an Escondido-based energy company that hopes to invest \$1.2 billion in a wind farm that would generate electricity for as many as 300,000 homes, a company official said. If the area becomes part of the preserve, energy development would not be allowed.

The **[National Park Service](#)**, which manages the 16-year-old preserve, is working with state Department of Fish and Game officials on contingency plans to re-introduce pronghorn to the grassy plateau, known as the Lanfair Valley.

Placing the area under park service jurisdiction would give the agency a chance to restore a missing species to the landscape, said Dennis Schramm, preserve superintendent.

"We identified this opportunity about 15 years ago," he said.

Pronghorn -- often called "pronghorn antelope" -- have distinctive brown and white markings. They look like antelope but are a genetically different species. They can run 50 to 60 mph. Cheetahs are faster, but only for short distances.

The plan is to capture and move pronghorns from herds living on similar terrain in

northeastern Arizona, Schramm said.

Golden legacy

The pronghorns vanished from the Lanfair Valley about the same time that gold was discovered in the Castle Mountains, attracting hundreds of miners.

A plaque at the base of the Castle Mountains says gold was discovered there in 1907, and the town of Hart quickly sprang up. At its peak, Hart had 400 people, five hotels, eight saloons, a newspaper and a church. The supposition is that people who lived in the area hunted pronghorn for food.

Story continues below



AP photo

These pronghorns are the type that may be reintroduced to the Mojave Desert.

Within a decade, the mines were played out, as were the pronghorn, and the town was deserted, according to the marker erected in 1984 by the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus, a fraternal organization dedicated to the study and preservation of Western heritage.

The pronghorns never came back, but gold mining returned in a big way.

In 1988, Castle Mountain Venture obtained mining permits and, three years later, started digging pits near the old town site, mine manager Mick Lynch said. In 12 years, the mine produced 1.34 million ounces of gold and 400,000 ounces of silver, he said.

Because of the mining activity, the Castle Mountains area was excluded from the Mojave National Preserve when it was created in 1994. The preserve is similar to a national park, although hunting and some other uses are permitted there that would not be allowed in a national park.

The mining company is now close to completing reclamation work that involved shaping the spent ore into contours that blend into the landscape and re-establishing native plants.

The huge pits, however, will remain.

The mining company and the park service are negotiating an agreement that would pay the company for claims and patents covering about 7,000 acres, Lynch and Schramm said.

David Lamfrom, California desert field representative for the National Parks Conservation Association, last week led a visitor to the edge of one of the massive mine pits.

It would be a good location for an interpretive center or museum to showcase a century of California gold mining history, he said.

Unique botany

Story continues below



David Danelski / The Press-Enterprise
Oak Creek Energy Co. has an application pending with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to develop turbines on as much as 7,660 acres in the same area of former goldmines being proposed for re-establishing the pronghorn.

The plateau below the Castle Mountains is far from civilization, reachable by rough dirt roads.

Lamfrom drove 10 miles on a rough track and crossed the California state line twice to get there. Peaks of the Castle range and the New York Mountains define the edges of the flats that could become pronghorn territory.

A Joshua tree forest stretched into the distance for hundreds of square miles.

"Looks at these lush trees. It's very dense, for a desert," Lamfrom said.

Jim André, a UC Riverside botanist and director of Sweeney Granite Mountains Desert Research Center in the National Reserve, said the plateau is a rare desert grassland ecosystem that features clumps of perennial bunchgrasses -- including the rare *Bouteloua eriopoda*, or black grama -- that grow below the Joshua trees, yuccas, chollas and other larger plants.

The area is also home to rosy penstemon, a three-foot tall perennial with intensely pink, tubular flowers. The plant has been found only near the Castle Mountains and in Nevada's Clark County, André said.

Adding the Castle Mountains area to the Mojave National Preserve would create a protected wild area covering 800 square miles and two mountain ranges without any paved roads, André said.

Solar and wind development would be prohibited.

Oak Creek Energy Co., which has wind turbines in the Tehachapi area, has an application pending with the BLM to develop turbines on as much as 7,660 acres in the area.

Ed Duggan, the company's executive vice president, said the site was chosen because mining already has disturbed the land. He said he wants to meet with Feinstein's staff to find a compromise that would allow the project to go forward.

"Why not a dual use?" he asked. Not allowing the wind project "seems narrow-minded in these trying economic times," Duggan said.

Lamfrom said he will go to Washington to lobby for Feinstein's bill.

"This desert grassland, home to bighorn sheep and golden eagles, changes people's perceptions about how lush and beautiful the Mojave can be," he said.

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