

# The Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Turns 20

*Critical Role in Saving Mono Lake*

*Future Holds Opportunities, Attacks*

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

In 1984, Ronald Regan signed legislation that turned over 118,000 acres of land surrounding Mono Lake to the US Forest Service in order to “protect its geologic, ecologic, and cultural resources.” Thus 20 years ago was born the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area, a landmark federal recognition of the tremendous public value of Mono Lake and the Mono Basin.

“It was hard to overcome the opposition of the Department of Water and Power” remembers Richard Lehman, Mono Lake’s freshman congressman and the author of the legislation. “They had a lot more congressmen and legislators than Mono County does.”

“We took land from the Bureau of Land Management and gave it to the Forest Service—that was controversial,” Lehman continues. “But it sure worked out right. When the Forest Service people came and took over they fell in love with the lake too. To be in a position to do something to protect that area is one of the best things that ever happened in my life.”

## **Critical Land Protection**

The Scenic Area brought critical national attention to Mono Lake’s plight; it also brought important management oversight and resources to the lands surrounding the lake. The Scenic Area Management Plan, developed over four years with local residents, set limits on acceptable change from 1984 levels of development and land use. It also identified zones ranging from those in which existing commercial activity is allowed and encouraged, such as along Highway 395, to those in which solitude is the primary value and land development is not allowed, such as Mono’s remote east shore.

The plan also established an important recreation management policy for the Scenic Area. Public visitation is focused at specific sites, like South Tufa, allowing impact management while leaving much of the Scenic Area open to individual exploration and discovery.

## **Part of Saving Mono Lake**

The Scenic Area legislation was clear that the water rights of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) were unaffected by Congress’ action. And yet, the Forest Service had a mandate to protect the ecology and resources of the area, both being rapidly degraded by the excessive diversion of water. It became clear that the Scenic Area Management Plan couldn’t impose any changes on diversions, but it couldn’t be silent on the matter either.

In the end, the Forest Service identified a lake level management range of 6377–6390 feet as necessary for the

Scenic Area. A round of lobbying in Washington DC by DWP was countered by a round of lobbying by the Mono Lake Committee, and in the end Mono Lake gained important federal recognition of the need to stabilize Mono Lake.

Interestingly, the Scenic Area designation also played unexpected and important roles in the lake’s protection. For example, toxic dust storms that blew (and still blow) off the exposed lakebed were a critical issue before the State Water Board. One of DWP’s solutions was to tear down a large portion of Black Point, a volcanic hill on the lake’s north shore, and spread the dark cinders across the exposed lakebed, sealing in the dusty ground. The Scenic Area’s mandate to preserve the shoreline in undisturbed condition, happily, precluded such engineering adventures.

## **Challenges Ahead**

As California’s population increases, so increases visitation to the Mono Basin and associated impacts on Mono Lake and surrounding lands. The Forest Service will continue to play a critical management role in the years ahead as it seeks to both protect the ecologic, geologic, and scenic resources of the area and to make this remarkable area available to the public.

While striving to meet those management challenges, the Scenic Area will also have to confront direct assaults to its existence.

Internally, federal funding has been cut year after year for both the Forest Service and the Scenic Area. Staffing is now roughly just one third of what it was ten years ago, making it difficult for remaining staff to work successfully.

Externally, there are challenges to the Forest Service’s authority to protect the Scenic Area. Caltrans, as part of its highway project adjacent to Mono Lake, continues to deny that the USFS has federal authority to require “all possible planning to minimize harm” to Mono Lake as laid out by law. And a proposed large home subdivision development that violates Scenic Area standards threatens to embroil the Forest Service in a messy enforcement issue.

Even so, the big picture is overwhelmingly positive. “Now Mono Lake is an international resource,” observes Lehman, “Over twenty years Mono Lake has gained in importance as a place for scientific study and understanding of the environment and as a place for simple rest and rejuvenation.”

Indeed, it takes nothing more than a visit to Mono Lake’s quiet shoreline and a look across the bird-covered lake to confirm that the Scenic Area has achieved 20 years of success in protecting one of the most remarkable places in California. ❖