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SUIT FILED TO PROTECT RARE SPECIES AND A PRICELESS LANDSCAPE IN SANTA BARBARA COUNTY'S COASTAL MOUNTAINS

Santa Barbara, Calif. – Today, two conservation organizations filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court to protect fragile habitat and rare species in the path of a massive, remote fuel break recently approved in the Los Padres National Forest. The suit is also an effort to encourage the Los Padres National Forest to focus on reducing fire risk where it matters most, directly in and around communities.

The Gaviota Fuel Break would clear-cut native chaparral habitat across a six-mile-long, 300-foot-wide swath (the length of a football field) between Refugio Pass and Gaviota Peak, along the crest of the Santa Ynez Mountains. The site – located far away from any structures – lies at the heart of the Gaviota Coast, one of the crown jewels of Santa Barbara County.

Ironically, the Forest Service's experts consistently state that the best way to protect communities from wildfire is to create defensible space immediately around structures, and to construct and retrofit homes with fire-safe materials. Remote fuel breaks, such as the one at issue in today's lawsuit, are an inefficient way to reduce fire risk. In fact, the Forest Service ranks the Gaviota Fuel Break project with a low priority score of 84 out of a total of 163 fuel breaks in the Forest.

"Creating a 300-foot-wide, six-mile-long habitat clearance zone in an area far from any community is a waste of taxpayer dollars, an ineffective way to reduce fire risk, and an unnecessary destruction of nature," said Richard Halsey, director of the **California Chaparral Institute**. "The science is clear. The Forest Service needs to focus its fire prevention efforts directly within and around communities at risk, not in faraway locations known for their spectacular natural beauty."

The key species that will be seriously threatened by the Gaviota Fuel Break is the beautiful Refugio manzanita (*Arctostaphylos refugioensis*). Considered "endangered" by the California Native Plant Society, the classic icon of the chaparral only grows in a narrow ridgeline band between Point Conception and Santa Ynez Peak along the coast of Santa Barbara County – exactly where the Gaviota Fuel Break is scheduled to run. The fuel break would cut through some of manzanita's largest populations.

"In rushing to approve this project, the Forest Service has failed to take simple steps to protect one of the rarest manzanita species on Earth," said Jeff Kuyper, executive director of **Los Padres ForestWatch**, a conservation organization based in Santa Barbara that works to protect rare plants

and animals throughout the Los Padres National Forest. “The Refugio manzanita is too important to sacrifice for an ineffective, expensive fuel break that is far-removed from communities.”

When the Forest Service initially announced the project in 2014, officials indicated they would carefully examine ways to avoid negative impacts by preparing an Environmental Assessment. But the agency suddenly reversed course in 2015. Ignoring previous collaborative efforts with conservation groups and scientists, the agency determined the project was excluded from environmental review. The decision was based on the claim that the project was a “timber stand improvement.” There is no merchantable timber in the area.

In the lawsuit, the groups – Los Padres ForestWatch and the California Chaparral Institute – ask the court to order the Forest Service to conduct the proper level of environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of the Gaviota Fuel Break before it can proceed and to implement the project consistent with the Los Padres Forest Plan.

“The Forest Service cannot stretch the language of their NEPA categorical exclusions like taffy,” said Nina Robertson, an attorney with **Earthrise Law Center** who is representing the groups filing the lawsuit. “An exclusion for timber stand improvement does not cover construction of multiple fuel breaks in areas with no timber and where those fuel breaks are destroying the important chaparral ecosystem and the rare and sensitive species that exist there.”



Photo: The ridgeline and trail where the fragile chaparral habitat will be clear cut, 150 feet on either side of the road, the length of a football field. Refugio manzanita can be seen on the right.

[California Chaparral Institute](#) is a nonprofit, research, and educational organization dedicated to the preservation of native shrubland habitats throughout the world, with a particular focus on chaparral ecosystems in California.

[Los Padres ForestWatch](#) is the only local nonprofit organization working to protect wildlife, wilderness, and watersheds throughout the Los Padres National Forest, from the Big Sur Coast to the backcountry of San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties and beyond.

Founded in 1996, [Earthrise Law Center](#) is the environmental legal clinic at Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland, Oregon with an office in San Francisco. Earthrise Law Center is a team of attorneys and staff working to achieve targeted environmental improvement while teaching the next generation of advocates to do the same.