

NEWS

Stornetta lands now protected

Presidential proclamation includes bluff-top Mendocino Coast ranchlands in national monument

BY MARY CALLAHAN
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

With a stroke of his pen — six pens, actually — President Barack Obama turned a remote piece of the Mendocino Coast into a national destination Tuesday in an Oval Office ceremony that locals in attendance described as something right out of a dream.

The Point Arena-Stornetta Public Lands is now officially part of the 1,100-mile California Coastal National Monument, protected under a presidential proclamation long sought by locals.

It made for a special moment for five lucky advocates who were invited to join the president Tuesday as he signed the executive order.

“I’ve been, like, on a cloud for three days,” said Larry Stornetta, whose family owned the 1,665-acre property for three generations before it was sold into public ownership.

“It’s been amazing,” said Eloisa Oropeza, tribal chairwoman of the Manchester-Point Arena Band of Pomo Indians, who got a hug from the president simply by asking. “I keep wanting to pinch myself and ask myself, ‘Is this real or am I dreaming this?’”

The president used his executive authority under the 1906 Antiquities Act to include the bluff-top ranchlands in the marine monument that runs along the California coast, from the border of Oregon to Mexico.

Created under executive order by President Bill Clinton in 2000, the monument takes in more than 20,000 exposed rocks, reefs, seastacks and islands at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.



REUTERS / KEVIN LAMARQUE

U.S. President Barack Obama signs a document designating the Point Arena-Stornetta Public Lands as part of the California Coastal National Monument during a ceremony in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington March 11, 2014. Since taking office in 2009, Obama has designated more than 2 million acres of federal wilderness and thousands of miles of trails. He also has established nine national monuments.

Obama’s proclamation described the addition as “a wind-swept landscape of dramatic coastal beauty and significant scientific importance.”

The Stornetta lands include the biologically rich Garcia River. Chert and obsidian artifacts found on the site speak to human occupation dating back 4,000 years.

“We are talking about over 1,600 acres of incredible coastline in California that reflects the incredible diversity of flora and fauna,” the president said before signing the document. “It is a place where scientists do research; where people who just want to experience the great outdoors can take advantage of it. It is a huge economic boost for the region.”

Point Arena is already an official

“gateway community” to the monument. It now has the only mainland extension, in what local residents and government representatives hope will bring new attention and tourism dollars to Mendocino County’s sometimes overlooked southwest corner.

“Thousands of new visitors each year will flock to see this gateway to the Coastal National Monument,” Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, said in a statement Tuesday.

“As they enjoy some of the best ocean views in Northern California, they will also provide a significant boost to the local tourism industry, already Mendocino County’s biggest employer.”

Huffman and Rep. Mike Thompson,

D-St. Helena, attended the ceremony as sponsors of a bill to include the Stornetta lands in the national monument, which passed the Republican-controlled House unanimously last year. Companion legislation sponsored in the Democrat-controlled Senate by California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer languished in committee.

Obama used his executive authority to bypass Congress and place the land into the national monument, the latest in a string of presidential orders since he vowed in January to make 2014 "a year of action."

Before signing the executive order, Obama said he believed in the importance of preserving "the natural bounty that has been passed on to us from previous generations...for future generations."

He said he would continue to use his executive authority where possible "to make sure that our children, our grandchildren, are going to be able to look upon this land of ours with the same wonder we have."

The president singled out Larry Stornetta for recognition, acknowledging the care with which his family had farmed the land for nearly a century before ensuring it was ac-

cessible to the public in perpetuity.

Stornetta, who still runs cattle on the ranch with his brother, Charlie Stornetta Jr., said it was a proud and profound moment for a guy who has seldom left Point Arena except to attend Santa Rosa Junior College and Chico State University.

"You don't get to shake the president's hand every day and have him thank you and your family for selling the property to the agencies and taking such wonderful care since the early 1900s," Stornetta, 64, said by phone.

He said he planned to sightsee in Washington for a few days after a whirlwind, cross-country trip hastily planned when word broke Saturday afternoon that Obama would make the designation.

Invited with him to attend the signing were Scott Schneider, president and chief executive of Visit Mendocino County; Merita Whatley, manager of the Point Arena Light-house gift store; and former Point Arena Mayor Leslie Dahlhoff.

Schneider said the president himself opened the door to the Oval Office to usher in his guests when they arrived Tuesday morning, having been escorted to the White House

from a neighboring building by Secret Service personnel.

Upon reaching the West Wing, a Marine in full uniform held the door open, Schneider said.

"It was so dramatic -- with the presidential seal above the door," Schneider said.

"It's so exciting, such a wonderful day," Whatley said, "and what a privilege to be here and feel we're representing a whole lot of people."

A large community celebration is planned this afternoon on the new monument land. It will include U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Neil Kornze, principal deputy director of the Bureau of Land Management, the agency that oversees the land.

Obama said in his formal remarks that he hoped one day to visit the new monument area for himself.

"I'm sure it will put a smile on his face," Stornetta said. "It's a wonderful piece of property, and we've known it a long time, and now I think the public's finding out."

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