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Assemblyman Jeffries Withdraws Lake Mathews Access Bill

AB 1686 would have allowed limited fishing, hiking and biking, but pre-existing, multi-jurisdictional legal settlements forbid all human access

RIVERSIDE: Citing binding and troubling legal settlements that forbid all public contact and use of Lake Mathews and the surrounding public lands, Assemblyman Kevin Jeffries (R-Lake Elsinore) announced today that he must withdraw his Lake Mathews Access Bill, AB 1686 in order to avoid expensive lawsuits by those who do not want the public to be able to access publicly owned lands.

“I have driven by Lake Mathews for years, looking at the barbed wire fence and ‘no trespassing’ signs, and wished that there were a way to allow fishermen limited public access to the Lake,” said Assemblyman Jeffries. “City of Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge is another person who felt passionately about allowing limited and controlled public access. Fishermen, day hikers and others had all hoped that there was a way to protect the critical habitat in the area, safeguard our water supply, and yet still allow limited public access to Lake Mathews without disturbing those who live in the vicinity, but in the end, we discovered that while we may have been able to accomplish those goals with a carefully crafted plan, there are questionable legal settlements that have been made in the past that prevent any access whatsoever to the public.”

Specifically citing a legally binding agreement in 2002 between Metropolitan Water District (MWD) (owners of the Lake and surrounding property), California Department of Fish and Game, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency, and the Audubon Society, Jeffries said that even if he could further amend the bill to resolve the remaining concerns of some neighbors, passing the bill would only lead to re-opening costly lawsuits that would have to be paid for by the taxpayers and ratepayers of Riverside County and the State of California.

“I think the settlement agreement that closed the Lake and surrounding property was a bad deal for residents of Riverside County, but our consultants believe it is bulletproof. Unfortunately, even a compromise that could have left the Lake protected, but opened the 5,000 acres surrounding the Lake to low impact hiking is prohibited under this agreement. This is what happens when you have an agreement between four agencies and organizations that are not seeking a balanced approach with our public lands —people lose. Despite the progress we were making, and the overwhelming support we’ve gotten for the bill from neighbors and local officials, I cannot in good conscience force the taxpayers of the County and the State to fork out unknown amounts of money trying to re-open a Lake that has been so successfully sealed shut by the lawyers.”

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Assemblyman Kevin Jeffries represents Western Riverside County and Northern San Diego County, including the communities of Jurupa, Riverside, Lake Elsinore, Wildomar, Murrieta, Temecula, Fallbrook, Bonsall, Valley Center, and Julian.