IRONWOOD FOREST NATIONAL MONUMENT - This place 30 miles from Tucson, with its dramatic vistas, archaeological heritage and unique ecology, is just one of more than 800 properties in the federal Bureau of Land Management's National Landscape Conservation System being touted for a new American preservation network.

Elena Daley, a BLM administrator and the conservation-system director, was here last week to join forces with environmental groups in support of a congressional act that would permanently designate 26 million acres of Western lands for conservation.

"This is like being part of a birthing," she said. "I think we are all about to witness the next major conservation system in the United States."

The Ironwood Forest monument is one of many "crown jewels" in the patchwork of iconic BLM lands spread over 13 states. Among the destinations: Vermilion Cliffs in Arizona, Lewis and Clark Trail in Idaho and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah.

All told, the system includes 15 national monuments, 14 national conservation areas, 161 wilderness areas, 10 historic trails and 38 wild and scenic rivers.

With congressional approval, these would become part of a permanent package comparable to the national park system. The bill before Congress awaits a floor vote in the Senate; a parallel House measure, with 65 co-sponsors, is scheduled for subcommittee hearings in two weeks.

The law would provide no new money or regulations, nor would it automatically change recreational use, grazing rights or mining in the target areas. But proponents say its adoption would serve as a launching pad for protective steps.

"It'll come, but it's delicate," says John Shepard, deputy director at the Sonoran Institute, a land-conservation group that sponsored Daley's visit to Arizona. "What it does is, it puts the system on a level playing field with the national parks and the national forests."

The Sonoran Institute is part of the Conservation System Alliance, a coalition of 74 recreational, environmental, religious and other groups pushing the measure with support from the Bush administration.
monuments, wilderness areas and historic trails in Arizona, covering about 3.2 million acres.

Among the most prominent:

**National Conservation Areas**
- **Gila Box Riparian**: 22,000 acres along the Gila River near Morenci, with cliff dwellings, historic homesteads, bighorn sheep and more than 200 species of birds.
- **Las Cienegas**: 42,000 acres of southern Arizona grassland and oak hills, home to several endangered species.
- **San Pedro Riparian**: 56,000 acres along the San Pedro River in southeastern Arizona, with more than 350 bird species, plus 80 species of mammals and 40 of amphibians and reptiles.

**National Monuments**
- **Agua Fria**: 71,000 acres containing one of the Southwest's most significant systems of late prehistoric sites.
- **Grand Canyon-Parashant**: 808,000 acres of outstanding geological and paleontological features in far northwest Arizona.
- **Ironwood Forest**: 129,000 acres of ironwood forest in southern Arizona.
- **Sonoran Desert**: 409,000 acres of saguaro-studded valleys and rugged mountains in southwestern Arizona.
- **Vermilion Cliffs**: 280,000 acres of narrow canyons and scenic bluffs in a northern Arizona hiking destination.