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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

INDIGENOUS LAND TRANSFERS HELP MEET CALIFORNIA 30x30 CONSERVATION GOALS

Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Protect Palm Canyon Watershed

Palm Springs, CA -- The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians (ACBCI) in coordination with Friends of the Desert Mountains (Friends) and the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy are pleased to announce the return of 656 acres of unceded lands in upper Palm Canyon, increasing indigenous land access while continuing to protect important scenic and biologic values in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains conservation area.

“The return of these 656 acres in upper Palm Canyon is the restoration of responsibility,” said Tribal Chairman Reid D. Milanovich, of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. “Since time immemorial, our people have stewarded these mountains and waterways. We are grateful to Friends of the Desert Mountains, the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, and the State of California for their partnership in advancing land conservation through Tribal stewardship. This land return strengthens our sovereignty, protects sacred and ecological resources, and ensures that future generations will continue to benefit from the cultural and environmental legacy of these lands. Conservation is strongest when guided by Tribal leadership rooted in generations of ancestral stewardship.”

Conserved in 2018 with funding from the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy (CVMC), this rugged parcel preserves in perpetuity critical habitat for the Peninsular Ranges Desert Bighorn sheep and other protected species. Additionally, this parcel contains important resources that serve wildlife and replenish the aquifer underneath the Coachella Valley.

On November 17, 2025, the CVMC Board approved transferring the 656 acres to the ACBCI for conservation and protection of cultural resources. Combined with other recent Friends and CVMC transfers, this makes over 1,200 acres returned to ACBCI since 2024. Returning land allows Indigenous nations to reclaim sovereignty and rebuild their governance, cultural, and spiritual systems. “Land back” is a movement that benefits all of society by addressing inequality and promoting environmental justice.

“Friends’ mission centers on connecting people to the land,” said Executive Director Tammy Martin. “We have done our best to conserve and protect this amazing resource. It is a privilege to return these lands to the people who have stewarded them since time immemorial.”

California's 30x30 conservation goal is part of a global initiative to conserve 30% of the world's lands and waters by 2030. This goal aims to protect biodiversity and ecosystem functions, address climate change, and expand access to nature through a variety of strategies, including creating protected areas, restoring degraded ecosystems, and working with local communities and private landowners. Tribal ownership and stewardship of lands is critical to achieving these goals.

"CVMC is honored to partner with ACBCI and Friends to return land and demonstrate that Tribal land returns are good for conservation, the Valley, and our wildlife, and represent a step towards healing and partnership between Tribes and the State of California," says CVMC Executive Director Elizabeth M. King. "Since 1991, our Conservancy has worked to put over 100,000 acres of land into conservation, and we couldn't think of a better steward for this parcel than ACBCI."

Secretary for Natural Resources Wade Crowfoot affirmed: "California Native American Tribes have stewarded our most precious lands since time immemorial, including Palm Canyon in the Coachella Valley. This land return restores Tribal stewardship to this special place and reflects our commitment to State-Tribal partnerships that help people and nature thrive together."

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About Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians is a federally recognized Indian Tribe located in Palm Springs, California, with reservation lands, which include portions of Palm Springs, Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage and portions of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountains. For more information about the Tribe, visit: www.aguacaliente-nsn.gov.

About Friends of the Desert Mountains

Friends of the Desert Mountains connects people to the land through conservation, education, and research, and is the official non-profit partner of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. Since 1987, Friends has conserved over 63,000 acres. Friends' educational programs and volunteer-led hikes introduce thousands of locals, visitors, and young people to the wonders of the desert every year. More info at: DesertMountains.org

About Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy

The Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy is a state agency that has worked to put over 100,000 acres of land towards conservation since 1991. The Conservancy provides grants to local partners and conserves and co-manages thousands of acres of land across the Coachella Valley, working to protect our cultural and natural resources.

Additional Background:

Between 2023 and 2025, the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and Friends of the Desert Mountains led and coordinated a series of landmark land-return transfers of ancestral lands to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains Conservation Area. These transfers included a 280-acre transfer of Conservancy-funded land by Friends of the Desert Mountains (2023), a 320-acre transfer of Conservancy-owned land (2024), and this newest 656-acre transfer of Conservancy-funded land by the Friends of the Desert Mountains (2025).