SUPPORT FOR PROTECTING
RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE

Fact Sheet and Map of Area

Support for National Monument
    Taos Pueblo
    Elected Officials
        U.S. Senators Jeff Bingaman (retired), Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich
        U.S. Representatives Ben Ray Lujan
        Taos County Commissioners Larry Sanchez and Nicklos Jaramillo
        Current and former elected leaders in New Mexico
        Mayor of Questa Ester Garcia
        County of Taos
        Town of Taos City Council
        Sante Fe City Council
    Business and Community Support
        League of United Latin American Citizens
        New Mexico Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
        New Mexico Trout
        New Mexico Wildlife Federation
        Northern New Mexico businesses
        Sportsmen Concern
        Taos Business Alliance
        Taos County Chamber of Commerce
        Taos Green Chamber of Commerce
        Taos Tourism Council
        Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
        Trout Unlimited
        United Bowhunters of New Mexico
        Vet Voice Foundation & New Mexican veterans
        National and State conservation organizations

Support for Permanent Protection/National Conservation Area
    Government Agencies and Elected Officials
    Business and Community Support

Media Clips

Economic Study: Economic Impacts of a Rio Grande del Norte National Monument
The Rio Grande del Norte contains some of the most spectacular lands and habitat in all of New Mexico.

Just above the Colorado border, the Rio Grande cuts into the Servilleta lava flows that make up the Taos Plateau. Further south, at the New Mexico state line, the gorge is 150 feet across; the river 200 feet below.

The gorge expands as it continues south, west of Questa, reaching over a half-mile wide with the Rio Grande appearing as a glinting green ribbon 800 feet below.

From the edge of the gorge, vast grass and sagebrush mesas mix with forested slopes of volcanic formations, where pronghorn and elk are often seen. Some 30 miles northwest of Taos rests Ute Mountain, a scenic icon of New Mexico. This forested extinct volcano rises 2,600 feet above the surrounding sagebrush plain and is the highest point on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands at 10,093 feet.

**Recreation Opportunities**

The area offers incredible opportunities for recreation. Areas within the gorge offer unsurpassed opportunities for whitewater rafting, climbing, bird watching or relaxing; while the Ute Mountain area provides solitude, even on busy weekends.

Other popular activities on and around Ute Mountain include hiking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, and star gazing. The area is prized for its quality hunting, and offers great fishing opportunities for a variety of trout species in a scenic gorge where bald eagles and various raptors soar overhead. Natural areas are prized for hunting and fishing. New Mexico's hunters and anglers together spend $326 million annually pursuing these sports and support an estimated 8,000 jobs.

**Ecological Importance**

Rich in botanical diversity, the Rio Grande del Norte region plays a critical role for birds and other wildlife. The area is part of the Rio Grande Migratory Flyway, a critical pathway for dozens of migrant birds making the journey between summer and winter breeding grounds.

The sagebrush and forest habitats of the high mesas are excellent habitat for pronghorn and elk and an array of animals big and small. Threatened species such as Rio Grande cutthroat trout and river otters make their home in the river.

The national monument will safeguard the Rio Grande, ensuring that people and wildlife can use the river for years to come and will protect a key source of irrigation for farmers and acequias in New Mexico.
Traditions and Heritage Protected
The area also contains Native American archeological sites displaying petroglyphs made centuries ago, and people can experience New Mexico’s past firsthand.

The Rio Grande del Norte National Monument will recognize the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Collection of firewood and pinion nuts, as well as grazing where it now exists will continue in the National Monument.

Community Support
The Rio Grande del Norte has benefited from an extensive community process that has been open and transparent, and has engaged local, state and national interests.

- Elected officials at the local, state and national levels, including the Taos County Commission, Town of Taos, City of Santa Fe and the New Mexico congressional delegation
- Taos Pueblo
- Taos Business Alliance and more than 100 local business owners
- Taos County, Mora Valley and Taos Green Chambers of Commerce
- New Mexico Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited and other sportsmen organizations and ranchers
- New Mexico League of United Latin American Citizens

Economic Value
Protected public lands are crucial to the health of North-Central New Mexico economy, attracting tourists who support our local economy.

A recent economic study showed the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is expected to boost tourism and support ongoing grazing—both activities contributing local economy benefits. It could add $15 million annually to the local economy and create 279 new jobs, an 89 percent increase in economic activity.

This growth is in addition to the $3.8 billion that outdoor recreation already contributes to New Mexico’s economy annually and the 47,000 New Mexican jobs it supports.

Protecting Rio Grande del Norte
Without permanent protection, there is no guarantee that these publicly-owned lands will be protected for the benefit of future generations. The community’s respect for the area, combined with the lack of natural conflicts such as oil and gas potential or known mineral deposits has helped to sustain the Rio Grande del Norte area’s untrammeled condition.

Despite years of community support for preserving the area the way visitors enjoy it today continued pressure on the area has the potential to degrade the region’s outstanding natural areas.

President Obama has the opportunity to boost the local economy with a Rio Grande del Norte national monument designation while preserving the recreational opportunities, habitat, historic and cultural sites that make these lands so precious without new bureaucracies and budgets by simply protecting these lands as a national monument.

RioGrandeDelNorte.org
El Rio Grande Del Norte National Monument

Area of Interest

Proposed Rio Grande Del Norte National Monument

Land Ownership
- State
- Game & Fish
- Tribal
- Private
- Forest Service
- BLM
SUPPORT FOR RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Taos Pueblo (resolution)

Elected Officials

  U.S. Senators Jeff Bingaman (retired), Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich
  U.S. Representatives Ben Ray Lujan (letter)
  Taos County Commissioners Larry Sanchez and Nicklos Jaramillo (press release)
  Current and former elected leaders in New Mexico (letter)
  Mayor of Questa Ester Garcia (op-ed)
  County of Taos (resolution)
  Town of Taos City Council (resolution)
  Sante Fe City Council (resolution)
JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 2013 - 1

APPROVAL TO SUPPORT THE RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE PROPOSAL S. 667 AND H.R. 1241 BY DESIGNATION OF A NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA OR PRESIDENTIAL PROCLAMATION AS A NATIONAL MONUMENT

Whereas, Taos Pueblo is a federally-recognized sovereign Tribal government with self-governing powers and authority; and

Whereas, Taos Pueblo has maintained since time immemorial, a traditional Tribal Governmental structure that consists of the Tribal Council, the War Chief's Office and the Governor's Office; and

Whereas, the Taos Pueblo Government is responsible for providing guidance and direction for making decisions that reflect the values, customs and traditions of the Tribe, and maintains the responsibility to serve and protect its people and the community; and

Whereas, the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area / National Monument in Taos and Rio Arriba Counties is an area of extraordinary environmental, economic, cultural and recreational value; and

Whereas, this legislation would designate 235,980 acres of public land in and around Taos and Rio Arriba Counties as a National Conservation Area or National Monument to be managed by the Bureau of Land Management; and

Whereas, the Rio Grande del Norte area includes two proposed wilderness areas: 8,000 acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness and the 13,420 acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness; and

Whereas, the people of Taos Pueblo have for centuries been important Earth stewards honoring the interconnection of all life in the Rio Gorge and surrounding plateau and mesas; and

Whereas, the Rio Grande del Norte area includes the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Gorge, previously designated as a Wild and Scenic River, and protects bighorn sheep habitat, river otter habitat, antelope, deer and elk wintering grounds and migratory corridors for wildlife including neo-tropical migratory song birds and birds of prey such eagles, falcons and hawks; and

Whereas, outdoor recreation and other uses of the public lands of Taos and Rio Arriba Counties are a vital part of the local economy; and

Whereas, designating these public lands as a National Conservation Area or National Monument would better protect their scenic, ecological, economic, cultural and recreation values in perpetuity form the adverse effects of future development; and

Whereas, traditional uses of the public lands, including piñon picking, firewood collection and grazing will be preserved by the Conservation Area; and
Whereas, the Conservation Area or National Monument will be included as a unit of the National Landscape Conservation System making it eligible for additional funding that may be used for restoration projects; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area or National Monument will ensure that these public lands will be conserved and enhanced for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations of all species; and

Whereas, a presidentially proclaimed National Monument would have very similar management and continue to be under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management while providing the same benefits listed above; and

Whereas, the Antiquities Act provides the President of the United States the authority to proclaim areas of federal public land as National Monuments and this authority could be used to create a Rio Grande del Norte National Monument;

THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED Taos Pueblo in the strongest terms supports federal protection of the lands contained within Rio Grande del Norte Proposal through a legislated National Conservation Area or a presidentially proclaimed National Monument in order to protect its scenic, cultural, environmental, economic, and recreational values.

Certification

The forgoing resolution "Approval to Support The Rio Grande del Norte Proposal S.667 and H.1241 by designation as a National Conservation Area or Presidential Proclamation as a National Monument" was adopted at a duly called meeting of the Taos Pueblo Governor's Office and Taos Pueblo Warchief's Office respectively on the 14th day of January 2013.

Ernesto C. Luhan, Taos Pueblo Governor

Samuel G. Gomez, Taos Pueblo Warchief

Curtis D. Sandoval, Lieutenant Governor

Matthew Montoya, Lieutenant Warchief

ATTEST:

Clyde M. Romero, Jr., Tribal Secretary

David Winters, Warchief Secretary
The President  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500  

Dear Mr. President:

As cosponsors of S. 667, the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act and S. 1024, the Organ Mountains--Doña Ana County Conservation and Protection Act, we write to voice our support for you to use your authority under the Antiquities Act to designate these areas as National Monuments.

New Mexicans on every level, from grassroots campaigns to Mayors and County Commissioners, have expressed their support for the protection of these special places. Community leaders, business owners, student groups, and conservation advocates from across New Mexico have traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with your staff and representatives at the Department of Interior to lend their support for the protection of the Rio Grande del Norte in Taos County and the Organ, Potrillo, Robledo Mountains and related areas in Doña Ana County. Still, there is much work to be done to ensure these areas are protected this year.

We will continue to work to advance legislation in the Senate to conserve these important areas in New Mexico, but in the absence of any certainty about the passage of legislation, we believe you should work with local communities to explore how a National Monument designation would protect the archeological and cultural resources in these two regions. Since the legislation has been carefully crafted to secure broad support, we request that you carefully consider these proposals.

Thank you for you continued commitment to preserving our valuable places in New Mexico for future generations.

Sincerely,

Jeff Bingaman  
United States Senator

Tom Udall  
United States Senator

CC: Secretary Ken Salazar, Department of Interior  
Chair Nancy Sutley, Council on Environmental Quality  
Acting Director Mike Pool, Bureau of Land Management
Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515  
June 18, 2012

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Mr. President:

It is with great pleasure that we present to you: *The Rio Grande del Norte: One Hundred New Mexicans Speak for a Legacy.*

This book is a product of the great efforts over many years that have gone into protecting the area known as the *Rio Grande del Norte*, located in northern New Mexico’s Taos and Rio Arriba counties. It showcases the faces and voices of 100 New Mexicans who work, play, cherish and live near the Rio Grande del Norte; and they share, in their own words, why these public lands must be protected.

The Rio Grande del Norte is in New Mexico’s Third Congressional district, and we are proud to be the sponsors of the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Act (H.R. 1241) to ensure that present and future generations of Americans will be able to enjoy these lands.

The Rio Grande del Norte has much value in protecting. It encompasses the iconic Rio Grande gorge, mountainous volcanic cones, vast mesas, and abundant wildlife including elk, bighorn, sheep, pronghorn antelope, eagles, and falcons. The area is rich with archaeological and other historical resources and is widely known for recreation including hunting, fishing, whitewater boating, hiking, camping, rock climbing, and bird watching.

Traditional uses of these public lands go back centuries and still continue today including livestock grazing, firewood gathering, and gathering of pitons pine nuts and medicinal plants. There are also many important traditional, cultural and religious sites in the Rio Grande del Norte that are in use today.

More than 160 local businesses support permanent protection for the Rio Grande del Norte, as do the Taos County Commission, The Village of Questa, Taos Chamber of Commerce, Mora Valley

H.R. 1241 has had a hearing in the House Natural Resources Committee and currently awaits further action by the Committee. Its Senate companion bill S. 667 (introduced by Senators Bingaman and Udall) has been reported out of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. We appreciate the Department of Interior’s expressed support for this legislation and the inclusion of the Rio Grande del Norte in the Department of Interior’s Crown Jewels report.

Despite overwhelming support by the local community and our best efforts to move legislation through the congress, we are concerned that moving this legislation may be currently unattainable. Thus, we ask that you consider formally recognizing the national significance of the Rio Grande del Norte as a National Monument under the Antiquities Act of 1906. Such a designation is warranted and would be a fitting way to help our state celebrate New Mexico’s centennial anniversary this year as well as support local business, wildlife, habitat, traditional uses, and historical and archeological sites associated with the proposed El Rio Grande Del Norte Conservation Area.

Sincerely,

Ben Ray Luján
Member of Congress

Martin Heinrich
Member of Congress


“Senator Bingaman and Senator Udall continue to champion the protection of the Rio Grande del Norte,” Taos County Commissioner Nicklos Jaramillo said. “Even the political stalemate in Congress can’t dissuade them from fighting for our economy and our cultural heritage, and all of Taos County joins me in appreciation.”

The senators’ letter to President Obama, dated October 25, 2012, voices support for presidential action on behalf of both the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act and the Organ Mountains--Doña Ana County Conservation and Protection Act. The senators are sponsors of stalled legislation to protect both culturally-significant areas of the state. “We will continue to work to advance legislation in the Senate to conserve these important areas in New Mexico, but in the absence of any certainty about the passage of legislation, we believe you should work with local communities to explore how a National Monument designation would protect the archeological and cultural resources in these two regions,” the letter states.

“I support the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument as a county commissioner, and as a veteran,” said Taos County Commissioner Larry Sanchez. “These lands matter for our water supplies, our livestock, our tourism economy, and our outdoor way of life. But the Rio Grande del Norte also offers healing to veterans returning from war, and a respite for all of us. I commend our senators for urging the president to act where Congress has not, and protect a place integral to our community.”

The designation of Rio Grande del Norte as a national monument has broad local support, including the Taos County Commission, the town of Taos, the mayor of Questa, the Taos and Mora Chambers of Commerce, the Taos Green Chamber of Commerce, the city of Santa Fe, and local small business owners.

July 31, 2012

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20050

Dear Mr. President:

As current and former elected leaders in New Mexico, we are writing to convey our strong support for the permanent protection of a treasured area of our state know as the Rio Grande del Norte. Located in Taos and Rio Arriba counties, this area contains many natural resources that for millennia have helped define what it means to live in northern New Mexico. The 236,000 acres of public lands within the Rio Grande del Norte are nationally significant, and protecting them will ensure that present and future Americans may use and enjoy them in perpetuity.

This area includes the rugged Rio Grande Gorge which attracts anglers, campers, hikers, rafters, kayakers, rock climbers, and those looking for a scenic place to picnic and relax. Hunters and other wildlife enthusiasts value the Gorge and the Rio Grande del Norte’s surrounding high mesas and volcanic mountains for its wildlife habitat that sustains bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, elk, cougar, and bobcat. This area is also part of the Rio Grande Migratory Flyway, one of North America’s great bird migration routes, and home to nesting eagles, falcons, and hawks.

The Rio Grande del Norte is also rich with thousands of archaeological and other historical sites associated with a diverse range of cultures that span at least 11,000 years. This region also supports traditional uses that continue today, including livestock grazing and gathering of firewood, piñon nuts, and medicinal plants. In addition, many important traditional cultural and religious sites within the Rio Grande del Norte are still used today by Native American peoples.

Protecting the Rio Grande del Norte will also help safeguard the waters of the Rio Grande, which is a critical drinking water source for hundreds of thousands of New Mexicans and provides irrigation water for millions of acres of farmland.

In addition to preserving these tremendous resources for all Americans to enjoy, permanent protection of Rio Grande del Norte will also benefit our region’s economy. Currently, active outdoor recreation delivers $3.8 billion annually to New Mexico’s economy and supports 47,000 jobs (according to the Outdoor Industry Association).

For all of these reasons and more, northern New Mexicans – Norteños– have demonstrated strong support for permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte. This includes more than 160 local businesses as well as the Taos County Commission, Town of Taos, Taos Chamber of Commerce, Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce, City of Santa Fe, San Antonio del Rio Colorado Land Grant, Hondo Mesa Community Association, and the Latino Sustainability Institute.
U.S. Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and U.S. Representatives Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich support protecting this unique region. They have introduced legislation in the U.S. House and Senate to establish the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area. In addition, Mr. President, if Congress fails to act, you can designate federal public lands in Rio Grande del Norte as a National Monument by using your authority under the Antiquities Act, as you have recently done in Virginia and California.

We believe that now is the time to protect the public lands of the Rio Grande del Norte and we respectfully request that you do all you can to secure our region’s rich natural and cultural resources and heritage — and their contribution to our economy — in perpetuity for all Americans.

Sincerely,

New Mexico State Representative Ben Luján, Speaker of the New Mexico House of Representatives
New Mexico State Senator Michael Sanchez, Majority Leader of the New Mexico Senate
New Mexico State Representative Ray Begaye, District 4
New Mexico State Representative Gail Chasey, District 18
New Mexico State Representative Brian Egolf, District 47
New Mexico State Representative Bobby Gonzales, District 42
New Mexico State Representative Antonio “Moe” Maestas, District 16
New Mexico State Representative Rick Miera, District 11
New Mexico State Representative Ed Sandoval, District 17
New Mexico State Representative Mimi Stewart, District 21
New Mexico State Representative Jim Trujillo, District 45
New Mexico State Representative Lucky Varela, District 48
New Mexico State Representative Rhonda King, District 50
New Mexico State Representative Danice Picraux, District 25
New Mexico State Representative Eleanor Chavez, District 13
New Mexico State Senator Carlos Cisneros, District 6
New Mexico State Senator Dede Feldman, District 13
New Mexico State Senator Eric Griego, District 14
New Mexico State Senator Tim Keller, District 17
New Mexico State Senator Cisco McSorley, District 16
New Mexico State Senator Nancy Rodriguez, District 24
New Mexico State Senator Jerry Ortiz y Pino, District 12
New Mexico State Senator Peter Wirth, District 25
Former Española Mayor Joe Maestas
Santa Fe County Commissioner Virginia Vigil, District 2
Santa Fe County Commissioner Liz Stefanics, District 5
Protect the Proposed Rio Grande NCA

By Esther Garcia
Mayor, Village of Questa and president, San Antonio del Rio Colorado Land Grant
Jan 29, 2012

As a Hispanic leader in New Mexico, a state that leads the nation with a 46.3 percent Hispanic population, I am writing to convey my strong support for the protection of the environmentally, culturally, and historically rich landscapes of the San Luis Valley and Rio Grande Gorge that encompass the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area in Taos County. Hispano culture and presence in New Mexico is and has always been closely connected to our states rich public lands. These areas provide our families and communities with hunting, recreation, traditions and so much more. Throughout time, they have also brought travelers and tourists, and with them economic development. As such, protecting these natural treasures is an important priority to us, and to our future.

Thanks to the leadership of Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, as well as Congressman Ben Ray Lujan, legislation has been introduced that would protect nearly 236,000 acres in north central New Mexico. The Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act also includes two wilderness areas – the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness, including the iconic Ute Mountain, and the 8,000-acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness. This area includes some of New Mexico’s most spectacular landscapes, including the Rio Grande gorge – which at some places is a half mile wide across, dropping to the Rio Grande River 800 feet below, and is a vital migratory flyway for a number of bird species. In turn, our country would be so much richer preserving both the unique Southwestern landscape and its incredible Western history.

Those of us with deep roots here appreciate that the protection of these landscapes preserves grazing within the National Conservation Area and specifically protects our right to hunt, fish and collect piñon nuts and firewood. It directs the Bureau of Land Management to protect the cultural, natural and scenic resources in the area, and protects rights granted under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This measure will help ensure that these ancestral lands will remain for future generations to come.

Lands like the Valle Vidal and the Latir and Wheeler Peak Wildernesses in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains have played large roles in Hispano life and culture throughout northern New Mexico’s history. Hunting and traditional gathering activities continue to this day, and bind generations of Hispano families together. Surging interest amongst Hispanic sportsmen also means more families are taking to our wilderness in pursuit of Rocky Mountain mule deer, blue grouse, and elk in Taos County.

While New Mexico’s congressional delegation is working very hard to ensure that this bipartisan piece of legislation passes through Congress. Congress has
proven itself to be incapable of moving any form of legislation, no matter how much local support exists back home. Fortunately, President Obama has the authority under the 1906 Antiquities Act to designate public lands as National Monuments when Congress is unwilling or unable to act. If Congress continues to operate in such a dysfunctional manner, then the president should use his authority under the Antiquities Act to protect places like the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area.

Recent polls demonstrate that New Mexicans strongly support protecting these lands, with the highest support amongst the Hispanic population and the community of Taos. I firmly believe now is the time for action to protect the unique Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, and to secure our rich cultural heritage, natural resources, and economic potential of Northern New Mexico forever.
County of Taos
RESOLUTION NO. 2012-13

Endorsing the permanent protection of the Rio Grande Del Norte Proposal through the enactment of legislation as a National Conservation Area or presidential proclamation as a National Monument

Whereas, legislation has been introduced in Congress and approved by the US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to designate the Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area in Taos County; and

Whereas, this is an area of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural, and recreational value; and

Whereas, this legislation would designate 235,980 acres of public land in and around Taos County as a National Conservation Area to be managed by the Bureau of Land Management (NCA); and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes two wilderness areas – the 8,000-acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness and the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Gorge, previously designated as a Wild and Scenic River, and protects elk wintering grounds and a migratory corridor for wildlife including birds of prey; and

Whereas, visitors and residents of Taos County today enjoy these public lands for hiking, camping, river rafting, photography, mountain climbing, grazing, hunting, fishing, bird watching, skiing, pinon picking, firewood collection, scenic enjoyment and other uses; and

Whereas, recreation and other uses of the public lands of Taos County are a vital part of the economy; and

Whereas, permanently protecting these public lands would better protect their scenic, ecological, economic, cultural, and recreational values in perpetuity from the adverse effects of future development; and

Whereas, a Conservation Area or National Monument designation furthers the goals of the Taos County Growth Management Plan; and

Whereas, a Conservation Area or National Monument will be included as a unit of the National Landscape Conservation System making it eligible for additional funding that may be used for grassland restoration projects; and
Whereas, a presidentially proclaimed National Monument would have very similar management, continue to be under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management while providing the same benefits listed above; and

Whereas, should Congress fail to act on this widely supported legislation the Antiquities Act provides the President of the United States the authority to proclaim areas of federal public land as National Monuments and this authority could be used to create a Rio Grande Del Norte National Monument;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED BY THE TAOS COUNTY COMMISSION that the Commission strongly supports protection for the lands contained within Rio Grande Del Norte Proposal through a legislated National Conservation Area or a presidentially proclaimed National Monument, in order to protect its scenic, environmental, economic, and recreational values.

PASSED, APPROVED AND ADOPTED THIS, 1st day of May, 2012

TAOS COUNTY
BRAIN'S MINUTE CLERK
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Book 776 Page 378
2 of 2
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BY DILLES

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF TAOS COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

Joe M. Duran, Chairman

Andrew D. Chavez, Vice-Chairman

Nicklas Jaramillo, Commissioner

Larry Sanchez, Commissioner

Daniel R. Barrone, Commissioner

Approved as to form

Barbara A. Martinez, County Attorney

Vote Record:

J. Duran ☐ No ☐ Abstain ☐ Absent
A. Chavez ☐ No ☐ Abstain ☐ Absent
N. Jaramillo ☐ No ☐ Abstain ☐ Absent
L. Sanchez ☐ No ☐ Abstain ☐ Absent
D. Barrone ☐ No ☐ Abstain ☐ Absent
RESOLUTION 12-67

A RESOLUTION OF THE TOWN OF TAOS COUNCIL ENDORSING THE PERMANENT PROTECTION OF THE RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE PROPOSAL THROUGH THE ENACTMENT OF LEGISLATION AS A NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA OR A PRESIDENTIAL PROCLAMATION AS A NATIONAL MONUMENT

WHEREAS, the Rio Grande del Norte consists of spectacular public lands spanning 235,980 acres of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural and recreational value in Taos and Rio Arriba counties; and

WHEREAS, the Rio Grande del Norte supports a unique suite of flora and fauna, and is a rich wildlife habitat for elk, bighorn sheep, otter, fish, and birds of prey, and encompasses an important wildlife migration corridor; and

WHEREAS, this area of wild land offers a paradise for hiking, camping, river rafting, photography, mountain climbing, fishing, and supports traditional land uses including hunting, gathering and grazing, and is an outstanding place for observing nature in all of its splendor, offering a much needed refuge for human solitude and spiritual rejuvenation; and

WHEREAS, protecting a substantial portion of the Rio Grande and its watershed will help sustain a key irrigation source for farmers and acequias and a key water supply for many towns and cities, and will help ensure that people and wildlife can use the river for years to come; and

WHEREAS, harm to these lands and waters would damage our region’s economy and culture, with demoralizing consequences for generations to come; and

WHEREAS, significant tourism revenues flow from this area in a state where tourism is the economic spine and there is significant potential for increasing these revenues through permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte; and

WHEREAS, permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte is a critical step in perpetuating the values of the people of northern New Mexico, who for centuries have demonstrated their deeply and widely held values of treasuring and protecting this great land; and
WHEREAS, in New Mexico’s centennial anniversary year, permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte, through legislation passed by Congress or as a National Monument designated by the President, is warranted and would be a fitting way to honor our people, our state and our grandchildren’s future.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Town Council of the Town of Taos that we strongly support protection of the Rio Grande del Norte through a legislated National Conservation or a presidentially proclaimed National Monument, in order to protect its scenic, environmental, economic and recreational values.

PASSED, APPROVED and ADOPTED, this 23rd day of October, 2012 at the Regular Meeting of the Town Council by the following vote:

Mayor Pro Tem Andrew T. Gonzales  yes
Councilmember Rudy C. Abeyta      yes
Councilmember Michael A. Silva     yes
Councilmember Frederick A. Peralta yes

TOWN OF TAOS

Darren M. Cordova, Mayor

ATTEST:

Renee Lucero, Town Clerk

APPROVED AS TO FORM

C. Brian James, Town Attorney
CITY OF SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

RESOLUTION NO. 2012-67

INTRODUCED BY:

[Signature]

A RESOLUTION

SUPPORTING THE PERMANENT PROTECTION OF THE RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE.

WHEREAS, the Rio Grande del Norte consists of spectacular public lands spanning 235,980 acres of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural and recreational value in Taos and Rio Arriba counties; and

WHEREAS, the Rio Grande del Norte supports a unique suite of flora and fauna, and is a rich wildlife habitat for elk, bighorn sheep, otter, fish, and birds of prey, and encompasses an important wildlife migration corridor; and

WHEREAS, this swath of wild land offers a paradise for hiking and fishing, and supports traditional land uses including hunting, gathering and grazing, and is an outstanding place for observing nature in all of its splendor, offering a much-needed refuge for human solitude and spiritual rejuvenation; and

WHEREAS, protecting a substantial portion of the Rio Grande and its watershed will help sustain a key irrigation source for farmers and acequias and a key water supply for many towns and cities, and will help ensure that people and wildlife can use the river for years to come in New
Mexico; and

WHEREAS, harm to these lands and waters would damage our region’s economy and
culture, with demoralizing consequences for generations to come; and

WHEREAS, significant tourism revenues flow from this area in a state where tourism is the
economic spine and there is significant potential for increasing these revenues through permanent
protection of the Rio Grande del Norte; and

WHEREAS, Santa Fe has assumed a national leadership role in protecting and preserving
public lands, and permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte is a critical step in perpetuating
the values of the people of northern New Mexico, who for centuries have demonstrated their deeply
and widely held values of treasuring and protecting this great land; and

WHEREAS, in New Mexico’s centennial anniversary year, permanent protection of the Rio
Grande del Norte, through legislation passed by Congress or as a National Monument designated by
the President, is warranted and would be a fitting way to honor our people, our state and our
grandchildren’s future.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE GOVERNING BODY OF THE
CITY OF SANTA FE that the governing body does hereby proclaim its wholehearted support for
permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City Clerk shall forward a copy of this resolution
to Barack Obama, President of the United States, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, Senator
Bingaman, Senator Udall, Congressman Heinrich and Congressman Lujan.

PASSED, APPROVED and ADOPTED this 27th day of June, 2012.

[Signature]

DAVID COSS, MAYOR
ATTEST:

Yolanda Y. Vigil, City Clerk

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

Geno Zamora, City Attorney
SUPPORT FOR RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Business and Community Support

Taos County Chamber of Commerce (resolution and press release)
Taos County Green Chamber of Commerce (press release)
Taos Business Alliance
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC- letter)
Sportment Organizations (sign-on letter and press release)
  New Mexico Wildlife Federation
  New Mexico Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
  New Mexico Trout
  Sportsmen Concern
  Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
  Trout Unlimited
  United Bowhunters of New Mexico
New Mexican veterans (sign-on letter)
National and State Organizations (sign-on letter)
  Amigos Bravos
  Audubon New Mexico
  Conservation Lands Foundation
  Environment New Mexico
  Organizers in the Land of Enchantment
  New Energy Economy
  New Mexico Wilderness Alliance
  Rivers and Birds
  Sierra Club
  Vet Voice Foundation
  The Wilderness Society
Letters from business owners (35 letters)
Endorsing the permanent protection of the Rio Grande Del Norte Proposal S. 667 and H.R. 1241, through the enactment of legislation as a National Conservation Area or presidential proclamation as a National Monument

Whereas, the proposed Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area in Taos and Rio Arriba Counties is an area of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural and recreational value; and

Whereas, this legislation would designate 235,980 acres of public land in and around Taos and Rio Arriba Counties as a National Conservation Area to be managed by the Bureau of Land Management; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes two wilderness areas: 8,000 acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness and the 13,420 acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Gorge, previously designated as a Wild and Scenic River, and protects elk wintering grounds and migratory corridors for wildlife including birds of prey; and

Whereas, visitors and residence of Taos and Rio Arriba counties today enjoy these public lands for hiking, camping, river rafting, photography, mountain climbing, hunting, fishing, bird watching, skiing, pinon picking, firewood collection, scenic enjoyment and other uses; and

Whereas, recreation and other uses of the public lands of Taos and Rio Arriba Counties are a vital part of the economy; and

Whereas, designating these public lands as a National Conservation Area would better protect their scenic, ecological, economic, cultural and recreation values in perpetuity form the adverse effects of future development; and

Whereas, traditional uses of the public lands, including pinon picking, firewood collection and grazing will be preserved by the Conservation Area; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area or National Monument will be included as a unit of the National Landscape Conservation System making it eligible for additional funding that may be used for grassland restoration projects; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area or National Monument will ensure that these public lands will be conserved and enhanced for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.
Whereas, a presidentially proclaimed National Monument would have very similar management, continue to be under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management while providing the same benefits listed above; and

Whereas, should Congress fail to act on this widely supported legislation the Antiquities Act provides the President of the United States the authority to proclaim areas of federal public land as National Monuments and this authority could be used to create a Rio Grande Del Norte National Monument;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED BY THE TAOS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE that the Board of Directors strongly supports protection for the lands contained within Rio Grande Del Norte Proposal through a legislated National Conservation Area or a presidentially proclaimed National Monument, in order to protect its scenic, environmental, economic, and recreational values.

Approved, this 13th Day of June 2012

Brad Malone, Chairman of the Board
Taos County Chamber of Commerce
For Immediate Release

Contact: Chris Cervini, 505-980-6110

Rio Grande del Norte National Monument Designation Could Boost Local Economy by $15 Million, Create 279 Jobs

Taos, NM (October 30, 2012) - National monument designation for the Rio Grande del Norte area northwest of Taos, New Mexico, is likely to have a “significant” impact on the local economy, boosting both revenue and jobs, according to a new independent economic study by BBC Research & Consulting. The increase in visitor expenditures is estimated to have an annual economic impact of approximately $15 million and create 279 new jobs – a projected 89% increase in economic activity associated with the Rio Grande del Norte.

The study estimated current and projected spending by visitors, and concluded that, “a public land designation, such as a national monument, may signal enhanced quality of a potential visitor experience, substantially increasing visitation.”

Researchers looked at several recently designated national monuments similar to Rio Grande del Norte, including Canyons of the Ancients, Ironwood Forest, and Prehistoric Trackways, and determined that if made a national monument, the Rio Grande area would be likely to experience extensive tourism growth due to increased white water boating, fishing, wildlife viewing and other outdoor activities. Current livestock grazing would also continue in the proposed national monument.

"Protecting Rio Grande del Norte as a national monument clearly makes good business sense," said Brad Malone, Chairman of the Taos County Chamber of Commerce. "This study suggests that recognizing the area as a national monument should bring more folks from across the country and around the world here to visit. We know how spectacular this place is, but having such recognition will raise awareness of its value enormously. In addition, the national monument designation would protect wildlife habitat prized by hunters and anglers and a broad variety of archeological and historic resources for future generations."

"I know firsthand the rewards of living and raising a family in a place so close to such beautiful natural areas. The mountains, skiing, mountain biking and the love of the outdoors are what tie me to the community, and I welcome the news that the monument designation could bring even more jobs to this area," said Adriana Blake, Treasurer of the Taos County Chamber of Commerce and manager at Taos Ski Valley, which was founded by her grandfather.

Last week, Senators Udall and Bingaman sent a letter of support for a national monument at Rio Grande del Norte to President Obama. The Senators, along with Reps. Lujan and Heinrich, have introduced legislation to designate Rio Grande del Norte as a national conservation area with wilderness, but the measure is currently stalled in Congress.

A coalition of sportsmen’s and other conservation groups including the New Mexico Wildlife Federation commissioned the report to look at the economic impact of a monument designation.

“Across the West, there are examples of communities that have lost access to public lands for hunting and fishing because people have failed to understand the real economic value these lands have for recreation and our way of life,” said Max Trujillo, Northern New Mexico Coordinator with the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. “It’s good to be able to show people that permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte as a national monument is a key part of the long-term health of New Mexico’s economy by ensuring that the hunting, fishing and outdoor traditions that families have passed on for generations will continue on into the future.”

Taos County Chamber of Commerce
515 Gusdorf Road, Suite 6
Taos, NM  87571
575-751-8800
“In addition to supporting our heritage, the Rio Grande is also the lifeline for many small businesses like mine in rural communities throughout New Mexico,” said rafting company owner Francisco Guevara. “Recreation-based businesses rely on the Rio Grande to support rafting, fishing and hunting trips. These activities also support restaurants, lodges, gas stations, outfitters and guides in addition to contributing to the local tax base.”

More than 100 local businesses support permanent protection. In addition to the Taos Chamber of Commerce, the monument proposal also has the endorsement of the Taos County Commission, the City of Santa Fe, the Town of Taos, along with the Taos Green Chamber of Commerce and the Partnership for Responsible Business.

### BACKGROUND Rio Grande del Norte
The proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is some 30 miles northwest of Taos and the Taos Pueblo in northern New Mexico, and includes areas of Taos and Rio Arriba Counties. The Rio Grande Gorge, with its dramatic cliffs and walls, as well as the Taos Plateau is included in the monument proposal. Legislation to protect this 235,000 acres of public land as a National Conservation Area (S. 667/H.R. 1241), including more than 21,000 acres of designated wilderness areas, was introduced by Sen. Jeff Bingaman and Rep. Ben Luján, and cosponsored by Sen. Tom Udall and Rep. Martin Heinrich.

### About the Economic Study
The study, “Economic Impacts of National Monument Designation,” by BBC Research and Consulting of Denver was commissioned to assess the economic impact of designating Rio Grande del Norte a national monument. In its 40-year history, BBC has completed thousands of similar impact analyses for public, private and non-profit clients. The study can be found at www.riograndedelnorte.org/economic-benefits.
For Immediate Release
Contact: Allan Oliver, CEO of New Mexico Green Chamber of Commerce: 505-333-9265

NM Green Chamber of Commerce Applauds Results of Economic Study Demonstrating National Monument Designation for Rio Grande del Norte Will Create New Jobs and Expand Local Economy

Taos, New Mexico (November 1, 2012) – New Mexico Green Chamber of Commerce leadership applauded the results of the BBC Research and Consulting study that shows designating the Rio Grande del Norte area northwest of Taos as a national monument would increase revenue and jobs in the area—respectively by $15 million and 279 new jobs.

Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall requested President Obama to take such action in a letter last week.

“National Monument status for the Rio Grande del Norte is a smart way to attract tourist dollars and assure the preservation of this cultural and historic area for generations to come,” said Allan Oliver, CEO of the NM Green Chamber of Commerce. “Many Green Chamber business members in Taos depend on the Rio Grande and the view of the Gorge and the Taos Plateau for their livelihoods. They inherently know the value of preserving the land and water. BBC Research and Consulting’s study makes a clear case for why national monument protection is good for Northern New Mexico businesses and good for our economy.”

Permanent protection for Rio Grande del Norte enjoys widespread support from businesses, elected officials, sportsmen, veterans, ranchers, land grants, conservationists, and others.

“We thank Senators Bingaman and Udall for pursuing national monument designation for Rio Grande del Norte,” said Erin Sanborn, director of the Taos Green Chamber of Commerce. “The community’s excitement about this opportunity is palpable and would provide an important boost for our local economy.”

The New Mexico Green Chamber of Commerce released a fact sheet last year showing that visitor spending at the 10 presidentially-designated national monuments around New Mexico contribute $54 million in annual tourist spending that supports nearly 1,100 local jobs, according to 2008 National Park Service data.
Senators Bingaman and Udall’s request of President Obama to use his authority under the Antiquities Act to designate this national monument comes as legislation to protect the Rio Grande del Norte continues to face uncertainty of advancing in Congress. Legislation by the Senators as well as Congressmen Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich to designate Rio Grande del Norte as a national conservation has languished since 2009 in Congress.

BBC Research and Consulting’s economic study can be found at [www.riograndedelnorte.org/economic-benefits](http://www.riograndedelnorte.org/economic-benefits).
League of United Latin American Citizens  
New Mexico State Office  
www.newmexicolulac.org

Ralph Arellanes  
NM State Director  
P.O. Box 21460  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  87154

August 1st, 2012

To: The Honorable Ken Salazar,  Secretary of the Department of Interior  
The Honorable US Senator Jeff Bingaman  
The Honorable US Senator Tom Udall  
The Honorable Congressman Ben R. Lujan  
The Honorable Congressman Martin Heinrich

Greetings to our Distinguished Secretary of the Department of Interior Ken Salazar and our Distinguished New Mexico Congressional Delegation. We hope and pray this letter finds you well and in good spirits. As you know, LULAC is our Nations’ oldest, largest and most respected Latino/Hispano civil rights and advocacy organization. It is with great joy and anticipation that New Mexico LULAC and our councils across New Mexico emphatically support the ongoing efforts to protect the area known as El Rio Grande Del Norte. This beautiful and diverse landscape is worth protection by any and all means available to our current Administration. There are few places on God’s good earth that offer this type of historical, cultural, and economic value not to mention the natural beauty and abundant opportunity for outdoor enjoyment.

Much of our New Mexico economy depends heavily on tourism and outdoor activity. The landscape within the Rio Grande Del Norte offers all of us an opportunity to retrace the tracks of our ancestors to the origin of our great state while taking in some of the most spectacular scenery on our planet. We urge the current Administration and our distinguished members of Congress to continue to work diligently to protect this irreplaceable landscape and preserve our history, culture and way of life for many generations to come. Thank you so much for your continued work and dedication to New Mexico LULAC and to the great people of New Mexico.

Sincerely,
Ralph Arellanes,
Ralph Arellanes  
New Mexico LULAC State Director  
National LULAC Board Member
August 3rd, 2012

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As veterans of New Mexico, we are writing to voice our support for the permanent protection of the sacred lands known as the Rio Grande del Norte. The area, located in Northern New Mexico is home to many of the natural resources that define not only our state but our surrounding region as well. The public lands in the areas located in Taos and Arriba counties total 236,000 acres. These are lands that are cherished by the veteran's community and through permanent protection we can ensure that all Americans will be able to experience their wonder for generations to come.

The Rio Grande del Norte is a mecca for outdoor recreation. The area is frequented by hikers, rafters, campers, kayakers, rock climbers and anglers. The Rio Grande del Norte is also home to a remarkable blend of wildlife habitat such as pronghorn antelope, elk, cougar, bighorn sheep and bobcat. The area also boasts some of the best elk, deer and antelope hunting in North America while the nearby Rio Grande and Red River offer a trout fishing experience that is truly phenomenal.

These lands also serve a special role within the veteran's community. These are lands that veterans and their families frequent to participate in outdoor activities. Also, with the hidden injuries that are often inflicted in war, lands such as the Rio Grande del Norte serve our community as a gateway to recovery. Nature, with all of its healing power can offer veterans the peace and solace they seek as they reintegrate back into our communities after grueling combat deployments to places such as Iraq and Afghanistan or as they continue to heal from conflicts of the past.

As leaders in our communities, veterans are also concerned about our natural resources. The Rio Grande del Norte serves as a critical watershed for our state and region. Much of New Mexico and surrounding areas, surrounded by desert, receives a crucial amount of its water supply from the Rio Grande. These waters also provide irrigation for millions of acres of land serving as a key supply source for farmers and acequias.

Rio Grande del Norte will also benefit the economy of the region. Outdoor recreation contributes billions of dollars to the New Mexico economy, which in turn supports tens of thousands of jobs. This is especially significant to the veterans of New Mexico. Currently, the unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans is almost twice the national average in some parts of the country. Supporting long-
term protections for Rio Grande del Norte could assist with helping the veteran’s community of our state create jobs and develop small business.

Currently, there is legislation in the Congress from New Mexico’s Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall as well as Representatives Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich that seek to protect Rio Grande del Norte as a national conservation area. If this legislation fails it is our hope that you will act by designating the federal public lands of the Rio Grande del Norte a national monument. As Veterans, we also commend you for use of this executive power in the designations of Ft. Ord and Ft. Monroe. These were fitting tributes to the men and women who have served our country.

Finally, we would like to close with a quote from one of America’s greatest soldiers and statesmen who is also the father of the Antiquities Act, Teddy Roosevelt. He once stated that there “can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country.” We are in agreement with the words of TR and this is why the veteran’s community today is seeking permanent protection of the public lands of the Rio Grande del Norte. We respectfully ask that you remember the sacrifices of our nation’s veterans in this hour as we seek to protect our natural and cultural heritage.

Sincerely,

Larry Sanchez
U.S. Army
1971-73
P.O. Box 283
Questa, NM 87556

Roger E. Ortega
U.S. Army
1967-69
P.O. Box 124
Questa, NM 87556

Fred E. Ortega
U.S. Army
1968-70
P.O. Box 74
Questa, NM 87556

Joe M. Duran
U.S. Army
1973-75
P.O. Box 285
Pensaco, NM 87553

Joseph M. Jones
U.S.M.C.
1965-69
P.O. Box 2474
Ranchos De Taos, NM 87557

Elias Martinez
U.S. Army
1969-71
P.O. Box 2031
Taos, NM 87571
Peter Valdez  
U.S. Army  
1968-70  
P.O. Box 1286  
Taos, NM 87571  

Cori Jenkins  
U.S. Navy  
1991-95  
P.O. Box 814  
Red River, NM 87558  

Billy E. Vigil  
U.S. Army  
1950-53  
P.O. Box 26  
Costilla, NM 87524  

Juan E. Espinoza  
U.S. Army  
1956-59  
P.O. Box 943  
Questa, NM 87556  

William Morris  
U.S. Army  
1974-78  
P.O. Box 684  
Taos, NM 87571  

Roger L. Blanco  
U.S. Army  
1967-69  
P.O. Box 1178  
Questa, NM 87556  

Epifanio Aguilar  
U.S. Army  
1966-68  
P.O. Box 102  
Cerro, NM 87519  

David Cisneros  
U.S. Navy  
1954-74  
P.O. Box 12  
Cerro, NM 87519  

Floyd Ortega  
U.S. Army  
1969-71  
P.O. Box 196  
Questa, NM 87556  

Chris D. Maes  
U.S. Air Force  
1973-77  
1341 Wilkes Way SE  
Rio Rancho, NM 87124  

Art Sanchez  
U.S. Army  
1969-71  
P.O. Box 471  
Questa, NM 87556  

Jake Montoya  
U.S. Army  
1968-70  
P.O. Box 472  
Questa, NM 87556  

Arnold Rael  
U.S. Army  
1969-71  
P.O. Box 895  
Questa, NM 87556  

Dave Salazar  
U.S. Army  
1950-52  
P.O. Box 1052  
Espanola, NM 87532
Nathan P. Cote  
U.S. Navy  
1966-68  
15475 Space Murals  
Las Cruces, NM 88011

Peter Ossorio  
U.S. Army  
1965-93  
1251 Southridge Drive  
Las Cruces, NM 88005

Bernie K. Digman  
U.S. Army  
1973-76  
4949 Modoc Trail  
Las Cruces, NM 88011
Oct. 26, 2012

For immediate release

Sportsmen support call for national monuments in New Mexico

New Mexico hunters and anglers applaud the effort this week by Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall to permanently protect two important areas at opposite ends of the state, both of which would help ensure that hunting, fishing and other outdoor traditions can continue for generations to come.

Sens. Bingaman and Udall on Thursday sent a letter to President Obama asking that he designate two areas important to sportsmen as national monuments – one north of Taos known as El Rio Grande del Norte and another in Doña Ana County.

The senators earlier co-sponsored legislation (S. 667 and S. 1024) to establish both areas officially as National Conservation Areas. Citing strong support by the surrounding communities and sportsmen as well as the inability of Congress to act on either bill, Sens. Bingaman and Udall asked that President Obama use his authority under the Antiquities Act to designate both areas as National Monuments.

As outlined in their earlier bill, the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Monument would consist of nearly 236,000 acres in Taos and Rio Arriba counties, including the Rio Grande Gorge and the plains above it from San Antonio Mountain to Ute Mountain. Long used by local residents, the area contains important habitat for elk, deer and pronghorn antelope as well as world-class fishing, and supports thousands of jobs.

“For anglers, permanent protection of this stretch of the Rio Grande is the key to long-term health of our local fishing opportunity and the economic contribution that fishing brings to this area,” said Nick Streit, owner of the Taos Fly Shop and a lifelong Taos hunter and angler.

Hunting guide Mark Casias of Taos also applauded the senators’ request for national monument status for El Rio Grande del Norte. “Residents of northern New Mexico have used this area for centuries to feed their families and pass on the hunting tradition,” he said. “As a national monument, we can be assured that those uses will continue on into the future.”

The Doña Ana-Organ Mountains Protection and Conservation Act calls for protecting culturally significant landscapes in southern New Mexico such as the Organ Mountains and important hunting areas including the Potrillo Mountains.
“This area is so important to sportsmen and others in southern New Mexico that it deserves national monument status,” said John Cornell, president of Doña Ana County Associated Sportsmen.

The Las Cruces Sun-News noted that President George H.W. Bush supported permanent protection for more than 300,000 acres in and around Doña Ana County in the 1990s.

For more information, contact New Mexico Wildlife Federation Communications Director Joel Gay at (505) 573-4191, or any of the following:

Nick Streit, (575) 751-1312
Mark Casias, (575) 758-4299
John Cornell, (575) 895-5090
November 2, 2012

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations and the many thousands of New Mexican sportsmen represented, we are writing to express our strong support for permanent protection of the 235,000-acre Rio Grande del Norte area in northern New Mexico.

The Rio Grande del Norte occupies a wild and rugged plateau of grass and sagebrush mesas, extinct volcano cinder cones and the spectacular Rio Grande Gorge. It contributes so much to the quality of our lives, and to the perpetuation of the region’s land-based Hispanic and Tribal cultures. The stretch of the Rio Grande River running through the proposed conservation area is unquestionably New Mexico’s finest and most iconic wild trout fishery. Additionally, the outstanding big game and waterfowl hunting opportunities within the boundaries of Rio Grande del Norte have an 11,000-year-old cultural hunting legacy that has few rivals nationwide.

Secretary Salazar, who was raised a short drive away from the Rio Grande del Norte, has been a leader in advancing proposals to protect the area. In November 2011, the Interior Department sent a report to Congress featuring the areas on BLM lands that deserve lasting protections which featured the Rio Grande del Norte. Secretary Salazar’s leadership in presenting the Rio Grande del Norte as a priority for protection demonstrates that he recognizes his home country as one of our nation’s crown jewels.

Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall introduced the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act (S. 667) in March 2011, and Congressman Ben Ray Lujan introduced a companion bill (H.R. 1241) in the House in April 2011. These bills would respect the rights and privileges of traditional land users (allowing hunting, fishing, livestock grazing, and wood/piñon/herb gathering), while at the same time protecting both New Mexico’s largest wild trout fishery, the watershed’s amazing migratory game and non-game birdlife as well as the surrounding area’s vast mule deer, antelope, elk and bighorn sheep herds.

The people of New Mexico have supported protection of these irreplaceable lands for nearly two decades. Bi-partisan grassroots efforts from sportsmen, grazing permittees, the land grant community, county commissioners, village councils and other stakeholders have been underway since the late 1980s to protect the 235,000 acres of BLM lands running along both sides of the Rio Grande from Pilar, New Mexico all the way to the Colorado border. Included in these federal protection areas is the designation of two new wilderness areas—the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and the Rio San Antonio Wilderness.

For years, despite the wishes of many New Mexicans and the efforts of our congressional representatives, Congress has failed to act to protect the Rio Grande del Norte area. For two straight sessions of Congress, the Senate has reported the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act out of committee, but it has yet to be voted on by the full Senate. Should this inaction continue, we call upon your leadership to act on behalf of New Mexicans and conservationists around the country using your authority under the Antiquities Act to protect the Rio Grande del Norte as a National Monument.
Sportsmen like us—who make up 38 percent of the voters in New Mexico—want to keep the best wild places on our nation’s public lands protected, as often these are the very best places to hunt and fish. We want to pass our backcountry traditions down to our kids and grandchildren. As our greatest hunter-president, Theodore Roosevelt, put it: “The nation behaves well if it treats its natural resources as assets, which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value.”

Protecting these lands also makes a great deal of economic sense. Thousands of sportsmen from all over the world come to hunt and fish Rio Grande del Norte every year, bringing in considerable profits and job opportunities for guides and other local businesses. The Rio Grande del Norte is a sustainable and dependable fiscal asset that adds greatly to Northern New Mexico’s economy and cultural future.

New Mexico’s hunters spend more than $150 million each year on this sport, and our anglers spend another $176 million. Together, these groups support some 8,000 jobs. A recent independent economic report from BBC Consulting estimated that protection of Rio Grande del Norte would generate more than $32,000,000 in recreation-based revenue annually for our state. This is a sustainable economic driver desperately needed in Northern New Mexico. That is probably one of the reasons the Taos County and Mora Valley Chambers of Commerce both back permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte. They recognize that protecting our natural resources just makes good business sense.

Permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte will ensure that this sportsmen’s heirloom will remain pristine and viable for generations to come. This country is where we go to stretch our legs or test our skills against the trout, deer, antelope and elk that call this refuge their home. It is where we show our kids the joys of sleeping under the stars. It is where we seek solitude.

In your 2011 speech on the America’s Great Outdoors Initiative you said that “each of us has an equal share in the land around us, and an equal responsibility to protect it.” Early in your first term you signed into law protections for more than 2 million acres of lands. We ask that you continue this leadership in creating an outdoor legacy by ensuring that the Rio Grande del Norte receives the protection it deserves. We thank you for your leadership on this critical issue. Your consideration is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jeff Arterburn, President, Gila Chapter, Trout Unlimited
Arnold Atkins, Chairman, New Mexico State Council of Trout Unlimited
Ben Brown, NM Field Representative, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Jesse Deubel, Chair, United Bowhunters of New Mexico
Ronald Loehman, Conservation Chairman, NM Trout
Toner Mitchell, President, Truchas Chapter, Trout Unlimited
David Probst, President, Bosque Chapter, Trout Unlimited
Dr. Sanford Schenmritz, Chair, Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen
Oscar Simpson, Chair, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, NM Chapter
Nick Streit, President, Enchanted Circle Chapter, Trout Unlimited
Max Trujillo, Las Vegas NM Chapter, Sportsmen Concern
Jeremy Vesbach, Executive Director, New Mexico Wildlife Federation

Cc: The Honorable Ken Salazar, Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior
November 2, 2012

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman
U.S. Senate
703 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC  20510

The Honorable Tom Udall
U.S. Senate
110 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC  20510

Dear Senator Bingaman and Senator Udall,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations and the many thousands of New Mexican sportsmen represented, we are writing to express our heartfelt gratitude for your leadership and efforts to permanently protect the proposed 235,000-acre tract of federal Rio Grande del Norte lands.

The stretch of river within the confines of the proposed Rio Grande del Norte protection area is unquestionably New Mexico’s finest and most iconic wild trout fishery. The outstanding big game and waterfowl hunting opportunities within the boundaries of Rio Grande del Norte have an 11,000-year-old cultural hunting legacy that has few rivals nationwide.

Permanent protection of this area will ensure that this sportsmen’s heirloom will remain pristine and viable for generations to come. Protecting these lands also makes a great deal of economic sense. Thousands of sportsmen from all over the world come to hunt and fish Rio Grande del Norte every year, bringing in considerable profits and job opportunities for local guides and myriad local businesses. The Rio Grande del Norte is a sustainable and dependable fiscal asset that adds greatly to Northern New Mexico’s economy.

We appreciate your tireless work to protect these spectacular areas, including your sponsoring and continued efforts to advance S. 667. We share your desire to see the Rio Grande del Norte area permanently protected, and we continue to urge the passage of the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act. Given the challenges facing public lands legislation this Congress, we are also grateful for your recent letter to President Obama expressing support for protecting the Rio Grande del Norte as a national monument. We look forward to working with you and the Administration over the coming months to ensure the permanent protection of this outstanding resource.

We thank you again for all that you are doing for this remarkable public resource, and offer any assistance we can to support your efforts to permanently protect these lands for future generations.

Sincerely,

Jeff Arterburn, President, Gila Chapter, Trout Unlimited
Arnold Atkins, Chairman, New Mexico State Council of Trout Unlimited
Ben Brown, NM Field Representative, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Jesse Deubel, Chair, United Bowhunters of New Mexico
Ronald Loehman, Conservation Chairman, NM Trout
Toner Mitchell, President, Truchas Chapter, Trout Unlimited
David Probst, President, Bosque Chapter, Trout Unlimited
Dr. Sanford Schemnitz, Chair, Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen
Oscar Simpson, Chair, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, NM Chapter
Nick Streit, President, Enchanted Circle Chapter, Trout Unlimited
Max Trujillo, Las Vegas NM Chapter, Sportsmen Concern
Jeremy Vesbach, Executive Director, New Mexico Wildlife Federation
October 24, 2012

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary of Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC  20240

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of our local and national organizations and the many thousands of members we represent, thank you for your role in the President’s decision to designate Chimney Rock as one of our nation’s newest National Monuments. We applaud your leadership and commitment to protecting our nation’s public lands—ensuring that our special wild places will remain as they are for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.

As the guardian of much of the country’s natural resources, you are instrumental in ensuring the wise management of our public lands, and that those areas possessing particularly unique values receive the extra protection they deserve. As such, we invite you to visit an area of uncompromising beauty and cultural significance that we are working to safeguard—the Rio Grande del Norte region of northern New Mexico. We believe that if you visit this amazing place, see first-hand the wild, rugged landscape, and meet the many local peoples who cherish this land, you will agree that it deserves the special protection a National Monument designation would provide.

As you may know, legislation is pending in Congress to establish the Rio Grande del Norte as a National Conservation Area, which would also include two new wilderness designations—the Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio Wildernesses. Introduced by U.S. Senators Bingaman and Udall in the Senate, and U.S. Representatives Lujan and Heinrich in the House, this measure has received broad-based support throughout New Mexico and the nation. While we strongly support this legislative effort, we fear it will not be successful this year due to the gridlock gripping the 112th Congress. This is why we are turning to you to ask that you consider championing immediate National Monument designation for the Rio Grande del Norte area.

Thank you for your consideration of our request to visit the Rio Grande del Norte and meet with those seeking its protection. We look forward to your continued good stewardship of our national heritage and the many natural, historic, and cultural treasures throughout our great country.

Sincerely,

Michael Casaus     Sanders Moore
New Mexico Director    Director
The Wilderness Society    Environment New Mexico
Eliza Kretzmann  
New Mexico Representative  
Sierra Club

Karyn Stockdale  
Vice-President & Executive Director  
Audubon New Mexico

Mark Starr  
Program Director  
Vet Voice Foundation

Roberta Salazar  
Executive Director  
Rivers and Birds

Matthew Henderson  
Executive Director  
Organizers in the Land of Enchantment

Stephen Capra  
Executive Director  
New Mexico Wilderness Alliance

Brian O’Donnell  
Executive Director  
Conservation Lands Foundation

Mariel Nanasi  
Executive Director  
New Energy Economy

Brian Shields  
Executive Director  
Amigos Bravos

CC:  The Honorable Jeff Bingaman  
The Honorable Tom Udall  
The Honorable Ben Ray Lujan  
The Honorable Martin Heinrich
December 21, 2012

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman  
U.S. Senate  
703 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Udall  
U.S. Senate  
110 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Martin Heinrich  
U.S. House of Representatives  
336 Cannon HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ben Ray Lujan  
U.S. House of Representatives  
330 Cannon HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senators Bingaman and Udall, Senator-Elect Heinrich and Congressman Lujan:

As a local business owner/resident here in Santa Fe and Taos County, New Mexico, I join with others in the business community in support of your effort towards the creation of a National Monument Area Designation for the Ute Mountain, Rio San Antonio and Rio Grande Gorge Region known as Rio Grande del Norte.

We recognize that:

- Tourism is our most significant industry here in Northern New Mexico;

- The majority of tourists come to New Mexico to enjoy the unparalleled scenery and pristine landscapes, as well as wildlife and wilderness recreation;

- Permanently protecting our incredible landscape will help preserve and grow our tourism industry. Failure to protect these areas will leave them vulnerable to degradation;

- The creation of a National Conservation Area with designated wilderness or a National Monument in Taos and Rio Arriba Counties will give local communities a natural attraction and resource to use as part of a long-term sustainable economic development plan;
The establishment of a protective designation for these lands will provide for future generations of New Mexicans continuing opportunities to enjoy the recreational opportunities to hunt, fish, observe wildlife and experience solitude.

Please accept this letter as an endorsement of protecting these special areas—either as a National Conservation Area and wilderness or as a National Monument.

Sincerely,

102 Northern New Mexico businesses
(see list below)

cc: President Barack Obama
    U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar

Sue Barnum
Consultant
5 Tesuque Meadow
Santa Fe, NM 87506

Will Mee
Agua Fria Village Association
2073 Camino Samuel Montoya
Santa Fe, NM 87507

Kim Van Deman
Taos Mountain Outfitters
General Manager
114 S Plaza
Taos, NM 87571

Carolyn Haddock
The Historic Taos Inn
Owner
125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte
Taos, NM 87571

Katie Adkins
Tecolote Café
Owner
1203 Cerrillos Rd
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Audrey Jenkins
New Water Innovations
Managing Partner
1512 Pacheco St, Suite C104
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Leslie Lakind
Lakind Dental Group
Dentist
400 Botulph Lane
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Susan Sims
Illuminated Manuscripts
PO Box 304
Ranchos de Taos, NM 87557

Melissa Epple
Unified Resources, LLC
Owner, Sustainable Community Developer
20 Village Lane
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Stephen Onstad
EverGreen Building Solutions
Owner
PO Box 29744
Santa Fe, NM 87592
Anna Hansen
Dakini Design
2008 Kiva Rd
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Eric Olriksen
Samson Energy, LLC
PO Box 3343
Taos, NM 87571

Drew Tulchin
Social Enterprise Associates
1803 Otowi Rd
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Douglas Meiklejohn
New Mexico Environmental Law Center
Executive Director
1405 Luisa St #5
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Mary MacGyver
Sagebrush Alpacas
Owner
54-B Jacinto Rd
Santa Fe, NM 87508

Jeremy McClain
SWCA Environmental Consultants, Inc.
5647 Jefferson St NE
Albuquerque, NM 87109

Carl Benanty
White & Luff Financial
549 S Guadalupe, Suite 202
Santa Fe, NM 87501

Jodi White
Focused Energy, LLC
CFO
1730 Camino Carlos Rey
Santa Fe, NM 87507

Nikki Ross
Twirl Toy Store
Marketing Director
PO Box 2293
El Prado, NM 87529

Erin Sanborn
Collaborative Green
President
PO Box 3571
Taos, NM 87571

John McAndrew
Lucid Writing and Editing
Owner
8 Bonito Ct
Santa Fe, NM 87508

Monique Schoustra
Great SW Adventures, Inc
Cultural & Natural Tour Guide
PO Box 31151
Santa Fe, NM 87594

William Brown
Sage West Consultants
Principal
PO Box 303
Arroyo Hondo, NM 87513

James O’Donnell
Around the World in Eighty Years
PO Box 3651
Taos, NM 87571

Douglas Kaufman
Kaufman Construction
PO Box 112
San Cristobal, NM 87564

Polly Raye
John Dunn Shops
Manager
PO Box 3678
Taos, NM 87571
Gale Dorion  
Gale Dorion Enterprises, Inc  
President, CEO  
PO Box 2859  
Taos, NM 87571

Vaughn Dearing  
High Country Real Estate Services  
Associate Broker  
PO Box 172  
Arroyo Seco, NM 87514

Karina Gersten  
A Kids Place  
PO Box 826  
El Prado, NM 87529

Meibao Nee  
Taos Organic Bed & Breakfast  
Owner  
PO Box 2383  
Taos, NM 87571

Peter Walker  
Swashbuckler Media  
Film Producer  
1335 Gusdorf, Unit D  
Taos, NM 87571

Larissa Weinman  
PPC Solar  
1036 Reed Lane, Unit 1  
Taos, NM 87571

Kelan Emery  
Emery Law Firm, P.C.  
President  
309 Salazar St  
Taos, NM 87571

Marilyn Jesmain  
Oststach Cultural Resource Interpretation  
Owner  
PO Box 1935  
El Prado, NM 87529

Amanda Stapleford  
Taos Gargirl  
President  
PO Box 477  
Arroyo Seco, NM 87514

Cathy Hope  
Iris Herbal, LLC  
Manager  
3204 Hwy 522  
Questa, NM 87556

Lesley Cox  
FEEL Design Associates  
PO Box 223  
Arroyo Seco, NM 87514

Trip Rothschild  
Rothschild Consulting  
Owner  
1631 Villa Strada  
Santa Fe, NM 87506

Brooke Zanetell  
Groove Facilitation, LLC  
PO Box 63  
El Prado, NM 87529

Carolyn Parrs  
Mind Over Markets  
President  
1600 Lena St, Building C  
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Henry Rivera  
ABV Ranch  
Owner/Manager  
PO Box 3177  
Taos, NM 87571

Oscar Rodriguez  
Town of Taos  
Town Manager  
400 Camino de la Placita  
Taos, NM 87571
Shemai Rodriguez
Taos Land Trust
Program Associate
PO Box 376
Arroyo Seco, NM 87514

Suki Dalury
Shree Yoga Taos
Owner
112 C Camino de la Placita
Taos, NM 87571

Christopher M. Smith
The Historic Taos Inn
General Manager
125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte
Taos, NM 87571

Glenn Schiffbauer
Santa Fe Green Chamber of Commerce
Executive Director
519 Vera Dr.
Santa Fe, NM 87501

Margaret Alley
Santa Fe Green Chamber of Commerce
2491 Sawmill Rd
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Ruthe Morand
Santa Fe Exchange
Owner/Partner
525 W. Cordova Rd
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Erin Wade
Vinaigrette, Inc & Vinaigrette ABQ LLC
709 Don Cubero Alley
Santa Fe, NM 87505

Richard Garcia
Casa Gallina Inc.
P.O. Box 63
Taos, NM 87571

Darryl Decker
Tierras de Taos Title Co.
115 La Posta Road
Taos, NM 87571

Robert Nightingale
Wilder Nightingale Fine Art
119 A. Kit Carson Road
Taos, NM 87571

Bob Freedman
R.S. Tenderloins Press
P.O. Box 1406
Taos, NM 87571

Joe Justad
Joe Justad Gallery
140 Kit Carson Road
Taos, NM 87571

Mary Jane Estrada
Mary Jane’s Home Cooking
616 Paseo del Pueblo Sur
Taos, NM 87571

J. Matt Thomas
Matt’s Gluten Free Bakery
P.O. Box 1075
Taos, NM 87571

Prinze Nehl
Creative Framing & Crafting
616 Paseo del Pueblo Sur
Taos, NM 87571

Greg Moon
Greg Moon Arts
109A Kit Carson Road
Taos, NM 87571

Mark Eagle Heart
Horse Feathers Inc.
109B Kit Carson Road
Taos, NM 87571
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lenny Foster</td>
<td>Living Light Gallery</td>
<td>107 Kit Carson Road, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mario Vargas</td>
<td>Santos &amp; Muertos Woodworking</td>
<td>P.O. Box 341, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill McGee</td>
<td>TAWA</td>
<td>P.O. Box 2736, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<td>Jeremy Jones</td>
<td>Teatro Serpiente</td>
<td>P.O. Box 477, Arroyo Seco, NM 87514</td>
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<td>Roberta Salazar</td>
<td>Rivers &amp; Birds</td>
<td>P.O. Box 819, Arroyo Seco, NM 87514</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bryan Steger</td>
<td>Bryans Gallery</td>
<td>121 Kit Carson Road, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curtis Randell</td>
<td>Artemisia</td>
<td>117B Bent Street, Taos, NM 87571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Martin</td>
<td>Dwellings Revisited</td>
<td>P.O. Box 470, Taos, NM 87571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre Delattre</td>
<td>Ortenstone/Delattre Fine Art</td>
<td>115 Bent Street, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rob Vander</td>
<td>Alhambra</td>
<td>P.O. Box 1603, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mary Theresa Floersheim</td>
<td>La Tierra Mineral Gallery</td>
<td>124K Bend Street, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<td>Chris Pieper</td>
<td>Mudd N Flood</td>
<td>103A Bent Street, Taos, NM 87571</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jon Kristian Moore</td>
<td>Leatherworks</td>
<td>124 Bent Street, Suite B, Taos, NM 87571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene Dulong</td>
<td>Bent Street Café &amp; Deli</td>
<td>120 Bent Street, Taos, NM 87571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara Basehart</td>
<td>Seconds Eco Store</td>
<td>120 Bent Street, Taos, NM 87529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Sanborn</td>
<td>Sanborn Automation</td>
<td>HC 74 Box 24372, El Prado, NM 87529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy V. Beck</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>P.O. Box 241, San Cristobal, NM 87564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy Nelson</td>
<td>Attorney at law</td>
<td>P.O. Box 158, San Cristobal, New Mexico 87564</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Matthew Spriggs
Catalytic
6955 NDCBU
414 Sipapu
Taos, NM 87571

Lana Jury
Jeweler
19 Leybo Road
Ranchos de Taos, NM 87557

Leslie A. Tafoya
Coyote Club
P.O. Box 102
Taos, NM 87571

Bernadine DeHerrera
The Village Shop
Manager
110 W. Plaza
Taos, NM 87571

Angie R. Cavadas
Taos Mountain Candle
HC 68 Box 247
Taos, NM 87571

Khalil Khweis
Pueblo Collections
102 S. Plaza
Taos, NM 87571

Tom Noeding
Bent Gallery and Museum
117 Bent Street, Box 153
Taos, NM 87571

Kari Delaney
Taos Cookery
113 Bent Street
Taos, NM 87571

Wendy Lacome
Copper Moon Gallery
105 Kit Carson Road
Taos, NM 87571

Luis and Daniel Barela
Taos Wood Carving
124A Paseo del Pueblo Sur
Taos, NM 87571

Jeremy Romero
Native Sons Adventures
1203 King Drive
Taos, NM 87571

Larry Hinds
Hinds & Hinds Budget Storage
920 Paseo Del Pueblo Norte
Taos, NM 87571

Eleanea Flantet
Hinds & Hinds Budget Storage
920 Paseo Del Pueblo Norte
Taos, NM 87571

Dennis Santistevan
Farmers Insurance and Financial Service
Agent
218B Paseo Del Pueblo Sur
Taos, NM 87571

Karlis D. Viceps
Positive Energy, Inc.
211 Cruz Alta Road
Taos, NM 87571

Jason Pfiefer
LIVING IT UP! Coaching
306 Camino Del Medio
Taos, NM 87571

Taamer Fasheh
Raw to Go
105B Quesnel Street
Taos, NM 87571

Julie Tennant
Julie Tennant Design, Inc.
22 Varos Road, P.O. Box 452
Arroyo Hondo, NM 87513
SUPPORT FOR PERMANENT PROTECTION
NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

Government Agencies and Elected Officials

  Bureau of Land Management (testimony)
  Mayor of Questa Ester Garcia (testimony)
  County of Taos (resolution)
Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 1241, the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act. The Department of the Interior supports H.R. 1241, which designates the nearly 236,000-acre Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area (NCA) in northern New Mexico as well as two wilderness areas within the NCA. The Secretary’s November 2011 *Preliminary Report to Congress on BLM Lands Deserving Protection as National Conservation Areas, Wilderness or Other Conservation Designations* highlighted the Río Grande del Norte as a proposal deserving Congress’ prompt attention.

**Background**

The proposed Río Grande del Norte NCA lies north of Taos on the border with Colorado and straddles Taos and Río Arriba Counties. The area includes the Cerro de la Olla, Cerro San Antonio and Cerro del Yuta volcanic cones jutting up from the surrounding valley – reminders of the area’s turbulent geologic past. Between these mountains is the Río Grande Wild & Scenic River gorge, carving through the landscape and revealing the basalt rock beneath the surface.

The human history of the landscape is as diverse as its features. Early prehistoric sites attest to the importance of this area for hunting and as a sacred site. Today the area is home to members of the Taos Pueblo, as well as descendants of both Hispanic and American settlers. Wildlife species – including bighorn sheep, deer, elk and antelope – bring both hunters and wildlife watchers, while the Río Grande and its tributaries provide blue ribbon trout fishing and other river recreation. Above it all soar the golden and bald eagles, prairie falcons, and other raptors.

**H.R. 1241**

H.R. 1241 designates nearly 236,000 acres of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as the Río Grande del Norte NCA. Each of the NCAs designated by Congress and managed by the BLM is unique. For the most part, however, they have certain critical elements, which include withdrawal from the public land, mining and mineral leasing laws; off-highway vehicle use limitations; and language that charges the Secretary of the Interior with allowing only those uses that further the purposes for which the NCA is established. Furthermore, NCA designations should not diminish the protections that currently apply to the lands. Section 3 of the bill honors these principles, and we support the NCA’s designation.

Section 4 of the H.R. 1241 designates two wilderness areas on BLM-managed lands within the NCA – the proposed 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and the 8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness. Both of these areas meet the definitions of wilderness. They are largely untouched by humans, have outstanding opportunities for solitude and contain important geological,
biological and scientific features – criteria outlined in the Wilderness Act of 1964. We support both of these wilderness designations as well.

**Conclusion**

H.R. 1241 is the product of many years of discussions and collaboration with the local community, stakeholders, and other interested parties. It protects both the valuable resources of the area and the way of life in this unique area of northern New Mexico.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 1241.
Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today’s hearing on H.R. 1241, legislation introduced by my Congressman, the Honorable Ben Ray Lujan, and cosponsored by his colleague, a fellow New Mexican and also a Member of this Committee, Representative Martin Heinrich.

I appreciate this opportunity to urge your support for H.R. 1241 to establish the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area. As a life-long resident of northern New Mexico, with my family going back many generations living and working in this unique and beautiful landscape, I wish to convey to you my heartfelt belief that the Congress must act to protect what to many of us is truly sacred land. And, I want to congratulate and publicly thank Congressmen Lujan and Heinrich, as well as Senators Bingaman and Udall. With their leadership, this historic legislation will forever protect a truly amazing natural gem, including the stunning Rio Grande gorge – which at some places is a half mile wide across, dropping to the Rio Grande River 800 feet below.

Like you, I serve in elective office -- as Mayor of the village of Questa, north of Taos, New Mexico. As an elected official, I know full well the difficult choices one must make when representing one’s constituents and the need to balance competing interests. And, this is what has brought me before you here today---on behalf of not only the citizens I have the pleasure to represent, but also the vast majority of all northern New Mexicans who seek to safeguard these special lands for our children and grandchildren. I can assure you that support for this legislation is broad, deep and strong.

I would like to acknowledge Mr. Erminio Martinez, who made the journey here with me from Taos County. A 12th generation New Mexican, Mr. Martinez grazes cattle in Taos County
as his ancestors have done for hundreds of years. He has also served as a magistrate judge in Taos County, and has submitted written testimony for this hearing.

My grandfather, J. P. Real, and his brothers formed a cattle business and general store in Questa in 1930. When I grew up, there was no running water. We walked to the store, grew our own food, and put up hay for our cattle. We survived because of the land and water that nature had so generously provided us. As my grandfather said, “Without land you have nothing, without water there is no life.”

So far as I am aware, no one disputes that the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area is a landscape of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural, and recreational value. This is a high mesa of sagebrush and grasslands interspersed with volcanic cinder cones covered with piñon-juniper woodlands. Here, in the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Gorge, are vital elk wintering grounds, key habitat for bighorn sheep, antelope and deer, and an world renowned migratory corridor for birds of prey—Peregrine falcons, Bald eagles, and Golden eagles.

Across this landscape, we who live nearby and a growing number of visitors enjoy hunting, fishing, bird watching, photography, hiking, camping, river rafting, mountain climbing, piñon picking, and the amazing national scenery. All of this is vital support for our local economy. Hunting and fishing alone in the Rio Grande area contribute tens of millions of dollars to New Mexico's economy annually.

Communities such as Questa, Hondo, Cerro, Pilar, and Antonito have been bound economically and spiritually to this wild landscape for many generations. One of the great virtues of H.R. 1241 is that it takes a comprehensive approach to the conservation of this landscape, with full recognition that there is a long human history to this region and that our small communities continue to be an essential element of the landscape. The legislation will protect both the natural resources and the way of life of this unique area, both of which are intrinsically linked in our community.
Those of us with deep roots in northern New Mexico appreciate that the protection of these landscapes preserves grazing within the National Conservation Area, and specifically protects our right to hunt, fish and collect piñon nuts and firewood. It directs the Bureau of Land Management to preserve the cultural, natural and scenic resources in the area. The measure will help ensure that these ancestral lands will remain as they are for those who will come after us.

Mr. Chairman, there is overwhelming local support for this legislation. Because of the collaborative way our congressional delegation has crafted this measure, many groups that haven’t always seen eye to eye on conservation issues have come together to support protecting this special landscape. Community involvement was extensive and the considerations taken in the bill’s language to accommodate the needs of traditional communities were significant. The legislation being before this subcommittee today is the product of years of meetings and discussions amongst those most affected, and I can assure you that northern New Mexicans overwhelmingly back it.

To ensure that you have a complete record illustrating the very broad support for this legislation in our local communities, I would like to submit these official documents. The first is the Resolution of support of the Taos County Commission, May 19, 2009. As you will see, the Commission resolved that it:

... recommends that Congress enact...the Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, and that the legislation include appropriate language to protect the Rio San Antonio Wilderness and the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness in order to protect their scenic, environmental, economic, and recreational values.”

I am also submitting for the record a list of some of the varied supporters for the proposal.
Thank you for your consideration, Mr. Chairman and Members of the
Subcommittee. This concludes my statement. I look forward to answering any
questions you may have.

Endorsing Newspapers:
Taos News
Santa Fe New Mexican
Albuquerque Journal

Endorsing Organizations:
San Antonio de Río Colorado Land Grant
Taos County Chamber of Commerce
Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce
Hondo Mesa Community Association
Sustain Taos Rivers and Birds Western Environmental Law Center
Taos Business Alliance
Taos Land Trust
Latino Sustainability Institute
New Mexico Wildlife Federation
New Mexico Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
New Mexico Wilderness Alliance
The Wilderness Society

Business owners:
Act One Gallery
Acuarelas Studio Gallery
Angie Colman Studio
Antiquarians Imports
Art Divas
Bookmarks Literary Services
Brazos Fine Art
Charles Collins Gallery
Chantal
Christmas in Taos Village Shop
Claireworks
Clark and Company
Cold Smoke Photography
Copy Queen of Taos
Coyote Moon
Dragonfly Cafe
Dobson House Bed and Breakfast
Doug West Gallery
El Porvenir
El Rincon Trading Post
Emily Ruffin Design
Enchanted Dreams Foundation
Far-Flung Adventures
Fernandez de Taos Bookstore
Fidget Gallery
For Art’s Sake
Francesca’s Clothing Boutiques
Frank Seckler Gallery
From the Andes
Garden and Soul
Gypsy 360 Café
Hair Bodyworks
Hondo Mesa Community Association
Hotel La Fonda
Import Outlet
Indian Hills Jewelry, Inc.
Jack Leustig Imaging
Jewelry and Painting Studio
La Lana Wools
Las Comadres
La Tierra Mineral Gallery
Leatherworks
Maison Faurie Antiquities
Maverick County Cafe
Mineral and Fossil Gallery
Michael McCormick Gallery
Michael G. Rosenberg and Associates, P.C.
Moby Dickens Bookshop of Taos
Morgan Gallery
Mountain Comfort Furnishings
Nicolas Salads and Soups
North Star Inn
Old Taos Traders
One World
Pitter Patter Collections, Inc.
Robert Mirabal Music Flutes and Native Gifts
Roosters Coffee
Sage Fine Art
Sapo
Sands of Time Glass
Scott Carlson Pottery
Seco Pearl
Southwest Framers
Southwest Sew and Vac
Stephan Killborn Gallery
Shoe-ri-fic
Starving Artists Gallery
Spanish Steps Gallery
Steppin' Out and Steppin' Out 2
Sun Shades of Taos
Stephen Rose, Attorney-at-Law
Starr Interiors
Silvermountain Designs
Tailwater Gallery and Flyshop
Taos Adobe Quilting
Taos Artisans Gallery
Taos Business Alliance
Taos Cookery
Taos Cow, Arroyo Seco
Taos Blue
Taos Cowboy
Taos Fly Shop
Taos Inn
Taos Lending Team
Taos Mercantile Co
Taos Mountain Outfitters
Taos Sunflower Yarns and Fibers
Taos Trading Company
The Bean, Inc.
The Broadsky Bookshop
The UPS Store
Three Dog Art
The Yarn Shop
The Taos Company
The Toy Basket
Total Arts Gallery, Inc.
Twirl
Twining Weavers
Walden Fine Art
Wildsmith Gallery
Wolf Prints
Woodall Fine Art Enterprises, Inc.
Xocoatle Chocolate
Taos County
Resolution No. 2009-23

Endorsing S. 874, El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area
Establishment Act

Whereas, the proposed El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation
Area in Taos County is an area of extraordinary scenic, environmental,
economic, cultural, and recreational value; and

Whereas, this legislation would designate 235,980 acres of public land in
and around Taos County as a National Conservation Area to be managed by the
Bureau of Land Management (NCA); and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes two wilderness areas – the
8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness and the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta
Wilderness; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes the upper reaches of the Río
Grande Gorge, previously designated as a Wild and Scenic River, and protects
elk wintering grounds and a migratory corridor for wildlife including birds of prey;
and

Whereas, visitors and residents of Taos County today enjoy these public
lands for hiking, camping, river rafting, photography, mountain climbing, grazing,
hunting, fishing, bird watching, skiing, piñon picking, firewood collection, scenic
enjoyment and other uses; and

Whereas, recreation and other uses of the public lands of Taos County
are a vital part of the economy; and

Whereas, designating these public lands as a National Conservation Area
would better protect their scenic, ecological, economic, cultural, and recreational
values in perpetuity from the adverse effects of future development; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area furthers the goals of the Taos County
Growth Management Plan; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area will be included as a unit of the National
Landscape Conservation System making it eligible for additional funding that
may be used for grassland restoration projects; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area will ensure that these public lands will be
conserved and enhanced for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future
generations.

Taos County
Resolution 2009-23
Page 1 of 2
NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED BY THE TAOS COUNTY COMMISSION that the Commission recommends that Congress enact S. 874, El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, and that the legislation include appropriate language to protect the Río San Antonio Wilderness and the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness in order to protect their scenic, environmental, economic, and recreational values.

PASSED, APPROVED AND ADOPTED THIS 14th DAY OF MAY, 2009.

THE BOARD OF TAOS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Daniel R. Barrón, Chairman

Joe Mike Duran, Vice-Chairman

Andrew Chavez, Commissioner

Charlie J. Gonzales, Commissioner

Nicklos E. Jaramillo, Commissioner

Approved as to form:

Sammy L. Pacheco, County Attorney

Attest:

Elaine S. Montano, County Clerk

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<tr>
<td>D. Barrone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>J.M. Duran</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Absent</td>
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<tr>
<td>A. Chavez</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Absent</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Gonzales</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>N. Jaramillo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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SUPPORT FOR PERMANENT PROTECTION
NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

Business Support
Taos County Chamber of Commerce (resolution)
Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce (resolution)
List of community support for permanent protection
JACO Outfitters (letter of support)
Sportmen sign-on letter
Community Land Grant of San Antonio del Rio Colorado (letter of support)
Endorsing S. 874, El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act

Whereas, the proposed El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area in Taos and Río Arriba counties is an area of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural, and recreational value; and

Whereas, this legislation would designate 235,980 acres of public land in and around Taos and Río Arriba counties as a National Conservation Area to be managed by the Bureau of Land Management; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes two wilderness areas – the 8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness and the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area includes the upper reaches of the Río Grande Gorge, previously designated as a Wild and Scenic River, and protects elk wintering grounds and migratory corridors for wildlife including birds of prey; and

Whereas, visitors and residents of Taos and Río Arriba counties today enjoy these public lands for hiking, camping, river rafting, photography, mountain climbing, hunting, fishing, bird watching, skiing, piñon picking, firewood collection, scenic enjoyment and other uses; and

Whereas, recreation and other uses of the public lands of Taos and Río Arriba counties are a vital part of the economy; and

Whereas, designating these public lands as a National Conservation Area would better protect their scenic, ecological, economic, cultural, and recreational values in perpetuity from the adverse effects of future development; and

Whereas, traditional uses of the public lands, including piñon picking, firewood collection, and grazing will be preserved by the Conservation Area; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area will be included as a unit of the National Landscape Conservation System making it eligible for additional funding that may be used for grassland restoration projects; and

Whereas, the Conservation Area will ensure that these public lands will be conserved and enhanced for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED BY The Taos County Chamber of Commerce that the Board of Directors recommends that Congress enact S. 874, El Río Grande
Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, and that the legislation include appropriate language to protect the Río San Antonio Wilderness and the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness in order to protect their scenic, environmental, economic, and recreational values.

APPROVED this 27 day of May, 2009

Ralph A. Lombardi  
Chairman of the Board  
Taos County Chamber of Commerce
Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce, Mora, New Mexico
Resolution No. 1-09

A RESOLUTION TO PROTECT AND PROMOTE THE ECONOMIC VITALITY, HEALTH, SAFETY, AND GENERAL WELFARE OF THE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN, NEW MEXICO BY ADVOCATING FOR THE CREATION OF A RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA ESTABLISHMENT ACT IN THE NORTH-CENTRAL PORTION OF TAOS COUNTY

WHEREAS, the Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce (hereinafter “Chamber”) is concerned with the protection and promotion of the economy vitality, health, safety, and general welfare of the people of the northern New Mexico; and

WHEREAS, accordingly, the Chamber may formally adopt a position pertaining to the management of the public lands within Taos County given the impact such management has on the economy, health, safety, and general welfare of the people of northern New Mexico; and

WHEREAS, the Chamber believes that public lands within Taos County are beloved by sportsmen, ranchers, outfitters and guides, local business, concerned citizens, outdoor enthusiasts, and conservation groups; and

WHEREAS: The Rio Grande Del Norte connects New Mexico from it’s northern to its’ southern boundary connecting people and communities along its’ natural course; and

WHEREAS: The Rio Grande Migratory Flyway represents one of the great natural migratory routes in the world. This flyway provides for some of the greatest diversity of flora and fauna species in the American Southwest.

WHEREAS: The Rio Grande Wild and Scenic Corridor provides unique game fishing habitat of national renown and the Punche Valley provide unique winter habitat for large migratory herds of elk and pronghorn; and

WHEREAS: The establishment of a National Conservation Area will provide for future generations of New Mexicans continuing opportunities to enjoy the recreational opportunities to hunt fish, observe wildlife and experience solitude.

WHEREAS, no private land will be adversely affected by the creation of the NCA or the associated Wilderness areas; and existing traditional uses, including livestock grazing and hunting, are protected in the proposed NCA and Wilderness areas;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce, Mora, New Mexico, after careful consideration, supports the creation of a Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area in Taos County and the associated Wilderness areas of Ute Mountain and Rio San Antonio and requests that the New Mexico Congressional Delegation also support this initiative through swift passage of the required federal legislation.

PASSED, ADOPTED, AND APPROVED THIS 5TH DAY OF MAY 2009.

MORA VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, MORA, NEW MEXICO

[Signature]

PRESIDENT,
MORA VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
SUPPORTERS OF PERMANENT PROTECTION OF
RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE

Conservation groups
Latino Sustainability Institute
Rivers and Birds
Sustain Taos
Taos Land Trust
Western Environmental Law Center

Business owners
Act One Gallery
Acuarelas Studio Gallery
Angie Colman Studio
Antiquarians Imports
Art Divas
Bookmarks Literary Services
Brazos Fine Art
Charles Collins Gallery
Chantal
Christmas in Taos Village Shop
Claireworks
Clark and Company
Cold Smoke Photography
Copy Queen of Taos
Coyote Moon
Dragonfly Cafe
Dobson House Bed and Breakfast
Doug West Gallery
El Porvenir
El Rincon Trading Post
Emily Ruffin Design
Enchanted Dreams
Foundation
Far-Flung Adventures
Fernandez de Taos Bookstore
Fidget Gallery
For Art’s Sake
Francesca’s Clothing Boutiques
Frank Seckler Gallery
From the Andes
Garden and Soul
Gypsy 360 Café
Hair Bodyworks
Hondo Mesa Community Association
Hotel La Fonda
Import Outlet
Indian Hills Jewelry, Inc.
Jack Leustig Imaging
Jewelry and Painting Studio
La Lana Wools
Las Comadres
La Tierra Mineral Gallery
Leatherworks
Maison Faurie Antiquities
Maverick County Cafe
Mineral and Fossil Gallery
Michael McCormick Gallery
Michael G. Rosenberg and Associates, P.C.
Moby Dickens Bookshop of Taos
Morgan Gallery
Mountain Comfort Furnishings
Nicolas Salads and Soups
North Star Inn
Old Taos Traders
One World
Pitter Patter Collections, Inc.
Robert Mirabal Music Flutes and Native Gifts
Roosters Coffee
Sage Fine Art
Sapo
Sands of Time Glass
Scott Carlson Pottery
Seco Pearl
Southwest Framers
Southwest Sew and Vac
Stephan Killborn Gallery
Shoe-ri-fic
Starving Artists Gallery
Spanish Steps Gallery
Steppin’ Out and Steppin’ Out 2
Sun Shades of Taos
Stephen Rose, Attorney-at-Law
Starr Interiors
Silvermountain Designs
Tailwater Gallery and Flyshop
Taos Adobe Quilting
Taos Artisans Gallery
Taos Business Alliance
Taos Cookery
Taos Cow, Arroyo Seco
Taos Blue
Taos Cowboy
Taos Fly Shop
Taos Inn
Taos Lending Team
Taos Mercantile Co
Taos Mountain Outfitters
Taos Sunflower Yarns and Fibers
Taos Trading Company
The Bean, Inc.
The Broadsky Bookshop
The UPS Store
Three Dog Art
The Yarn Shop
The Taos Company
The Toy Basket
Total Arts Gallery, Inc.
Twirl
Twining Weavers
Walden Fine Art
Wildsmith Gallery
Wolf Prints
Woodall Fine Art
Enterprises, Inc.
Xocoatle Chocolate
January 30, 2009

Representative Ben R. Luján
502 Cannon HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515
Fax: 202-226-1528

Dear Representative Luján:

On behalf of JACO Outfitters, LLC undersigned organizations, all committed to ensuring that New Mexico’s waterways provide clean water for drinking, irrigation, recreation, and wildlife, we urge you to support the **Clean Water Restoration Act of 2009**. This legislation, which is needed to protect the nation’s waters from pollution, will soon be reintroduced in the 111th Congress by Representatives James Oberstar, John Dingell, and Vernon Ehlers.

The bill would reaffirm the historical jurisdiction of the 1972 Clean Water Act and ensure all “waters of the United States”, covered for more than 34 years by federal safeguards, retain Clean Water Act protection. This bill does not create "new" protective authority, but simply restores the regulatory status quo. The bill is needed because decisions by the Supreme Court over the past few years (Rapanos/Carabell 2006; SWANCC 2001) and administrative actions by the Environmental Protection Agency and Army Corps of Engineers have muddied the waters regarding the jurisdiction of the Clean Water Act, making this bill critically important.

With the current confusion surrounding Clean Water Act jurisdiction, New Mexico’s waters are some of those most at risk. As an arid state with many small rivers and streams that do not flow year round, up to 94% of New Mexico’s waters are at risk of losing Clean Water Act protections. As New Mexico turns to surface water for more and more of our drinking water supply, we are in urgent need, in terms of both economic and public health concerns, of Clean Water Act protections for all our state’s waters.

Additional risks to New Mexico:

- **New Mexico could become a dumping ground.** If waters lose Clean Water Act protection, they are no longer protected from filling and dredging operations, pollution dumping, oil spills, and weakening water quality standards by the state. An industry would be allowed to discharge contaminated water without concern for public health and safety.
• **Closed basins (Mimbres, Tularosa, Estancia, Plains of San Augustine) in New Mexico could lose protection** and be exposed to unregulated dumping.
• **Public health is at risk** as many communities rely on water in closed basins for drinking, recreation, and irrigation.
• **Playa lakes are threatened.** Playa lakes help to recharge groundwater, store irrigation return flows, and provide habitat and cover for wildlife and livestock.
• **New Mexico’s wetlands are at increased risk.**

Governor Richardson has shown strong support for the bill by sending letters of support to Congress and by sending his Secretary of Environment Department, Ron Curry, to Washington D.C. to testify in support of the legislation. We have attached a copy of Governor Richardson’s letter and the text of Secretary Curry’s testimony for your review.

Great strides have been made in the 34-year history of the Clean Water Act in cleaning up and restoring New Mexico’s and the nation’s rivers and streams, but there is much work still to do. Today, over forty-five percent of the rivers and lakes in the United States are still not safe for fishing, swimming, drinking water supply, wildlife habitat, and other uses. In New Mexico, in the Rio Grande Basin alone, a total of 1,120 miles of assessed river reaches and at least 17,546 assessed lake acres are not meeting water quality standards. The Clean Water Restoration Act will return us, in New Mexico and throughout the country, to the work of cleaning up our waters and making them safe and clean.

On behalf of the undersigned organizations and our multiple memberships, we ask you to please support the Clean Water Restoration Act. We hope we can work together in the years to come to protect one of New Mexico’s most important resources – clean water.

Sincerely,

John Olivas - Owner
JACO Outftters, LLC
March 26, 2012

The Honorable Rob Bishop
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Committee
United States House of Representatives
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C.  20515

The Honorable Raúl Grijalva
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
United States House of Representatives
H2-186 Ford House Office Building
Washington, D.C.  20515

RE:  H.R.1241, the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act

Dear Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Grijalva,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations we are writing to express our strong support for H.R.1241, the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, and to thank you for holding a hearing on this important bill.  H.R. 1241 would preserve about 235,000 acres northwest of Taos as a conservation area, and designate within that two new wilderness areas—the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and the Rio San Antonio Wilderness.

Sportsmen like us—who make up 38 percent of the voters in New Mexico—want to keep the best wild places on our nation’s public lands protected, as often they are the very best places to hunt and fish.  We want to pass these backcountry traditions down to our kids – and grandchildren.  As our greatest hunter-president, Theodore Roosevelt put it: “The nation behaves well if it treats its natural resources as assets, which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value.”

The Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act will preserve our opportunities to hike, fish and hunt in this wild place, which is home to large elk and antelope herds as well as a first rate trout fishery.  New Mexico’s hunters spend more than $150 million each year on this sport, and our anglers spend another $176 million.  Together, these groups support some 8,000 jobs. That is probably one of the reasons the Taos County and Mora Valley Chambers of Commerce both back H.R. 1241.  They recognize that protecting our natural resources just makes good business sense.

This amazing area – a wild western plateau of grass and sagebrush mesas, extinct volcano cinder cones and the spectacular Rio Grande Gorge with its towering basalt cliffs – contributes so much to the quality of our lives. This watershed is New Mexico’s most expansive and iconic wild trout fishery. The surrounding country is where we go to stretch our legs or test our skill against deer,
antelope and elk. It is where we show our kids the joys of sleeping under the stars. It is where we go to seek some solitude.

Nearly a century after President Roosevelt urged stewardship of our public lands as a gift for those who will follow us, another Republican president echoed that view. At the dedication of the National Geographic Society’s new headquarters in Washington, DC on June 19, 1984, President Ronald Reagan said, “… we want to protect and conserve the land on which we live -- our countryside, our rivers and mountains, our plains and meadows and forests. This is our patrimony. This is what we leave to our children. And our great moral responsibility is to leave it to them either as we found it or better than we found it."

We thank you for your leadership on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Arnold Atkins, State Council Chairman, Trout Unlimited, NM
Toner Mitchell, President, Truchas Chapter, Trout Unlimited, NM
Jeff Arterburn, President, Gila Chapter, Trout Unlimited, NM
Nick Streit, President, Enchanted Circle Chapter, Trout Unlimited, NM
Dave Probst, President, Bosque Chapter, Trout Unlimited, NM
Nick Streit, Enchanted Circle Chapter, Trout Unlimited, NM
Jeremy Vesbach, Executive Director, New Mexico Wildlife Federation
Oscar Simpson, Chair, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, NM Chapter
Ben Brown, New Mexico Field Representative, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Dr. Sanford Schemnitz, Chair, Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen
Jesse Deubel, Chair, United Bowhunters of New Mexico
Ronald Loehman, Conservation Chairman, NM Trout
Jim Bates, President, National Wild Turkey Federation, NM Chapter
Senator Jeff Bingaman
703 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

June 11, 2008

Dear Senator Bingaman:

I am writing to you ask for your immediate and timely action regarding the creation of the Taos El Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area and the adjacent proposed wilderness areas of Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain.

As you know, this part of our state includes some of the most spectacular scenery in New Mexico. The proposed NCA would encompass the San Antonio de Rio Colorado Land Grant. Our Land Grant continues to traditionally use the proposed NCA

The Community Land Grant of San Antonio del Rio Colorado Supports the conservation bill with the changes that protect the Land Grants. We hope that the Senator will continue to support the Land Grant issues in New Mexico. The Bill includes in Section 2 article 5 that Land Grant Communities be recognized within the proposed NCA; in Section 3 articles G and H including grazing, firewood and pinon gathering would not be diminished and Section 3 article E of the Management Plan shall be developed in consultation with the State, local, and tribal governmental entities, land grant communities. Section 5 General Provision article F states nothing in this act enlarges, diminishes, or otherwise modifies any treaty rights.

Important to consider, our existing uses such as grazing, wood gathering, pinon and herb gathering, hiking, hunting, camping, and fishing. These activities would not be impacted by the creation of the NCA, but would be protected and encouraged the use. The northern New Mexico Land Grant communities who depend on this type of land use will enjoy the benefits of economic development through ecotourism if the area is enhanced by special designation.

Thank you for your support of this important proposal.

Sincerely,

San Antonio del Rio Colorado Board of Trustees

President /Date: 6-11-08
Vice President /Date: 6-11-08
Secretary/Treasurer /Date: 6-11-08
Trustee /Date: 6-11-08
Trustee /Date: 6-11-08
SUPPORT FOR PERMANENT PROTECTION MEDIA
United for wilderness in Taos County

The Taos News
2/21/2013
Matthew van Buren

Two U.S. senators and a congressman visited Arroyo Seco last weekend to discuss the permanent protection of public lands in Taos County.

During their Saturday (Feb. 16) visit, Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich and Rep. Ben Ray Luján, all Democrats from New Mexico, heard from those who would like to see full wilderness protection for the 46,000-acre Columbine-Hondo area north of Taos.

Several dozen wilderness supporters, including elected officials, business owners and nonprofit representatives, gathered at the Rivers and Birds offices in Arroyo Seco to hear legislative updates and urge federal action to protect the Columbine-Hondo.

The Columbine-Hondo was designated a Wilderness Study Area three decades ago. Last year, then-Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, introduced legislation to bring full wilderness protection to the area, but it did not pass. Michael Casaus, state director for the Wilderness Society, said the 112th Congress was the first in decades not to protect a single acre of wilderness.

Questa Mayor Esther García said village residents respect public lands as communal property, and she supports the creation of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness as a way to protect watersheds and traditional uses of the land. Taos Town Councilor Andrew Gonzales described the Columbine-Hondo as a “major watershed” with historical, cultural and economic significance.

Rafting guide Cisco Guevara said a wilderness designation would help stimulate business in the area, and he said water from the Columbine-Hondo is “essential for summer river levels.”

Outfitter Stuart Wilde said his clients come to Taos County for “solitude and natural beauty,” which they find in the Columbine-Hondo and Río Grande Gorge.

“Conservation is good for business here in Northern New Mexico,” he said.

Grazing permittee Erminio Martínez said his grandfather grazed cattle in the Columbine-Hondo before New Mexico gained statehood, and Martínez continues the tradition. He urged the dignitaries to protect the area from mining and timber threats while preserving traditional uses.

“My family has a long history in the Columbine-Hondo,” he said. “It is a beautiful piece of this planet.”

David Argüello, president of the Arroyo Hondo Arriba Land Grant, thanked the delegation for its support, saying he has a “historical attachment and family anchors” to the Columbine-Hondo. He said his ancestors raised livestock, collected medicinal plants and gathered firewood
from the area. Argüello spoke to the area’s importance as a watershed and irrigation source and said wilderness protection would be the best way to protect the area for the good of land grant heirs.

“Restorative justice is social justice and justice for all,” Argüello said.

Udall said those gathered made a “tremendously compelling case” for a wilderness designation for the Columbine-Hondo. He asked whether the form of the legislation introduced in 2012 was still acceptable to everyone, and no one objected.

The bill Bingaman introduced last year included concessions for mountain bikers and land conveyances to the villages of Red River and Taos Ski Valley. Taos Ski Valley would receive 4.6 acres of National Forest System land for the municipality’s wastewater treatment plant; Red River would receive four parcels on which to locate a wastewater treatment plant, a cemetery, a public park and a public road.

Taos Ski Valley administrator Mark Fratrick said the legislation is of the “utmost importance” to the village, both for the economic benefits a wilderness area and new mountain bike trails would bring, as well as for the conveyance, which would allow the village to seek funding for its much-needed treatment plant. Red River Mayor Linda Calhoun said the mountains surrounding Red River are essential to the viability of businesses there. She said being surrounded by National Forest land can also restrict future growth, however, and the land conveyances are important for municipal needs.

Heinrich said as an outfitter/guide he used to bring groups to raft and backpack in Taos County every summer. He referred to the Columbine-Hondo as “one of the best-kept secrets in the Southern Rockies.”

“To be a part of this is really quite special to me,” he said.

He said he is hopeful for an omnibus lands bill that would include the Columbine-Hondo during this session of Congress, though he referred to Washington, D.C., “gridlock” as the effort’s “worst enemy.”

“With this group, there’s nothing we can’t get done,” Heinrich said to those gathered.

The 236,000-acre Río Grande del Norte area was also the subject of some discussion during the delegation’s visit. Legislation Bingaman introduced last year to create a National Conservation Area, including two wildernesses, did not pass, and entreaties to President Obama to create a National Monument around the area were also unsuccessful.

The legislation was reintroduced earlier this month.

Heinrich also said he had a conversation with the president about two weeks ago about protecting the Río Grande del Norte and came away from it “very, very positive and optimistic.”

For more information about the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition, visit www.columbinehondo.org. For more information about the Río Grande del Norte, visit www.riograndedelnorte.org
N.M. region worthy of protection

Albuquerque Journal
2/19/2013
Kary Pierce

As a child, I grew up in the Colorado Rockies very close to Chimney Rock outside Pagosa Springs, Colo. Needless to say, when President Obama deemed it worthy of becoming a national monument, I was pleased. Those mountains are very special in my heart. I remember the wind whispering in the tall pines, playing in the rocky mountain caves, and crystal fresh waters in the small spring by my home. I was one of the people that wrote and asked the president to protect this land, and he listened.

It’s one thing to be a person that writes to the government about my interests for preserving natural ecosystems, it’s another when someone reaches out to others in a plea to do the same. One such place worthy of this request for care is in New Mexico, the Rio Grande del Norte. It’s a diverse area where people can connect with nature and its beauty.

The Rio Grande del Norte includes the fantastic Rio Grande Gorge, headwaters for the Rio Grande, breathtaking sagebrush plains, and Ute Mountain. It provides a critical wildlife habitat, and has thousands of archeological sites.

The main factors in determining the value of this preservation include clean water, clean air and access to the outdoors for hunting, hiking and other recreational activities. This brings me back to my childhood remembrance and the importance that we have this for future generations. It would be a selfish travesty to risk having these treasures of ecological opportunity taken from them.

There is heartfelt wisdom in protecting special places by creating national monuments on lands and waters that have been protected by the American people taking ownership. I would like this letter to represent a way of sharing to reach more people so they can be aware and advocate to protect that which cannot protect itself from human destruction. All we need to do is let the president know that the Rio Grande del Norte should be designated as a national treasure as well.
Rio Grande del Norte legislation reintroduced for Taos, Rio Arriba counties

The Taos News
2/19/013
Matthew van Buren

Federal legislation to create the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area has been reintroduced after efforts to protect the area through Congressional and presidential action failed last year.

According to a news release from New Mexico’s Congressional Delegation, Sens. Tom Udall, D-NM, and Martin Heinrich, D-NM, and Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, introduced legislation in the U.S. House and Senate to permanently protect the 240,000-acre area in Taos and Río Arriba counties.

Former Sen. Jeff Bingaman led the effort to create the Conservation Area for several years before retiring at the end of 2012.

He and others called for President Obama to create a National Monument to protect the area after legislation stalled last year.

“The residents of Taos and Río Arriba counties have joined us in an effort to protect their incredible landscapes and ensure the lands remain accessible for the benefit of locals and visitors. I was proud to take up this initiative with Jeff Bingaman and we will work to see that the preservation of the Río Grande del Norte is part of his lasting legacy.”

The land is currently under the purview of the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The text of the newly introduced legislation was not available from the Library of Congress prior to publication. However, previous bills called for the establishment of wilderness areas around Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain, and the creation of a National Conservation Area along the Río Grande Gorge.

Legislation has also called for traditional land uses, such as grazing, to be allowed to continue, garnering support from ranchers, land grant heirs and other groups.

Proponents of the move frequently tout the public’s “overwhelming support,” according to the delegation’s release, listing among its backers the Taos County Commission, village of Questa, Taos County Chamber of Commerce, area businesses and others. Protecting this land should be a top priority, and Secretary Salazar’s visit to Taos in December of last year reinforced that there is overwhelming support by the local community to do so,” Luján is quoted as saying.

A joint release from the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited and
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers praises the action.

“Our congressional leaders’ commitment to sportsmen and Northern New Mexico is without question,” Max Trujillo, sportsman organizer for the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, is quoted as saying. “This proposal has overwhelming local support but unfortunately has been tied up in a Congress that had no interest in protecting public lands.”

Garrett VeneKlasen, director of the Southwest Region of Trout Unlimited, also said protecting the Río Grande del Norte area is a top priority.

“We support this legislation, and our representatives introduced it because it is the result of years of work by local stakeholders,” he is quoted as saying in the release. “We are pleased to see a strong show of support from New Mexico’s congressional delegation and eagerly await action. We as a diverse community have come together, we’ve done our homework, and have come up with a plan to keep this hunting and fishing paradise as it is now.”

Udall and Heinrich have also reintroduced legislation to make the Valles Caldera National Preserve a National Park.

For more information about the Río Grande del Norte, visit www.riograndedelnorte.org.
Editorial: Resubmitted bill to conserve Río Grande del Norte promising to area

The Taos News
2/15/2013
Editorial

Last week, our Congressional delegation reintroduced a bill to protect 236,000 acres along both sides of the Río Grande as a national conservation area.

We applaud their perseverance.

This swath of dramatic landscape includes the Río Grande Gorge, and the Ute and San Antonio mountains in Taos and Río Arriba counties.

The so-called Río Grande del Norte has long been used for such traditional uses as grazing, hunting, fishing and gathering firewood. The area also contains many religious and cultural sites.

The timing is right to ensure this land remains permanently for the use of the people. The creation of a conservation area would prohibit new roads as well as future mineral development.

And making Río Grande del Norte a national conservation area would help attract visitors who, too, would want to enjoy these wild lands. This could be a welcome boost to the local economy.

Locally, strong support has been demonstrated, including by local governments, Taos Pueblo leaders, land grant associations and various community groups.

But an attempt at protection failed last year during the legislative deadlock.

Similarly, granting wilderness protection to 45,000 acres in the Columbine-Hondo area didn’t go anywhere in Washington, D.C., despite broad local support.

Now, U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich (who was elected to Jeff Bingaman’s seat last year) and Rep. Ben Ray Luján remain committed to conservation.

We agree that the natural resources of Northern New Mexico are worth protecting and offer them our support.

Poor election turnout

Taos County has 24,902 registered voters, but most of them decided to skip the Feb. 5 election for school board members and a two-mill levy.

That’s too bad.

In Taos, only voters residing in two districts could select a candidate, but anyone could vote to renew a two-mill levy that was set to expire after six years. The funds will be
earmarked for capital improvements, activity buses and school technology.

So, how many Taos voters headed to the polls to cast their ballots on the two-mill levy? The results say 1,397.

In Taos’ District 3, one candidate got 171 votes while the other received 35.

The situation was not much better in Peñasco, though Questa voters were engaged in determining the fate of their now-suspended board.

In September, only 1,918 voters showed up to decide on a Taos County Educational gross-receipts tax.

We question why voters don’t get fired up about school elections. The schools have an important role in our community. It is in there our future leaders, business owners, employees, and artists are created.

And, early voting makes it easy to stop at the bureau of elections in the county complex to mark Xs on an official ballot.

So, for those who didn’t vote, what’s your excuse?
My Turn: Make Rio Grande del Norte a national monument

The Taos News
2/15/2013
Kary Pierce

As a child, I grew up in the Colorado Rockies very close to Chimney Rock outside Pagosa Springs, Colo. Needless to say, when President Obama deemed it worthy of becoming a National Monument I was pleased.

Those mountains are very special in my heart. I remember the wind whispering in the tall pines, playing in the rocky mountain caves, and crystal fresh waters in the small spring by my home.

I was one of the people that wrote and asked the president to protect this land, and he listened. It’s one thing to be a person that writes to the government about my interests for preserving natural ecosystems, it’s another when someone reaches out to others in a plea to do the same.

One such place worthy of this request for care is in New Mexico, the Río Grande del Norte. It’s a diverse area where people can connect with nature and its beauty.

The Río Grande del Norte includes the fantastic Río Grande Gorge, headwaters for the Río Grande, breathtaking sagebrush plains, and Ute Mountain. It provides a critical wildlife habitat, and has thousands of archeological sites.

The main factors in determining the value of this preservation include clean water, clean air, and access to the outdoors for hunting, hiking and other recreational activities.

This brings me back to my childhood remembrance and the importance that we have this for future generations. It would be a selfish travesty to risk having these treasures of ecological opportunity taken from them.

There is heartfelt wisdom in protecting special places by creating national monuments on lands and waters that have been protected by the American people taking ownership. I would like this letter to represent a way of sharing to reach more people so they can be aware and advocate to protect that which cannot protect itself from human destruction.

All we need to do is let the president know that the Río Grande del Norte should be designated as a national treasure as well. Humbly I request to the reader of this article, please help.

K. Pearce is a member of Sierra Club-New Mexico.
From Río Grande del Norte to Otero Mesa, we all have our favorite places that make New Mexico, New Mexico. And with so many special places to enjoy outdoors, I am not surprised that, according to a recent Colorado College poll, two thirds of us in New Mexico consider ourselves conservationists and over 90 percent of us are concerned about the water in our state’s rivers.

Unfortunately, many of our parks, forests and open spaces in New Mexico are at risk from overdevelopment, and pollution from increased mining and drilling. President Obama has the opportunity to slow this trend and preserve one of our most special places in the state by designating Río Grande del Norte a national monument, which will permanently protect the area from development.

Río Grande del Norte is a spectacular example of all the things we love about New Mexico: incredible diversity and abundance of wildlife, majestic mountains, and the meandering Río Grande. It is one of the reasons a majority of New Mexico agree that our public lands enhance our quality of life.

It is up to our generation to permanently protect the parks, forests and special places we love, thereby giving our children the opportunity to enjoy them as much as we do.

Nina Gillespie
Albuquerque
U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, and Congressman Ben Ray Luján, all Democrats, are scheduled to visit Taos on Saturday to “meet with community stakeholders and discuss their efforts to protect federal land known as the Rio Grande del Norte, an announcement from Udall’s office said.

The senators also will highlight upcoming legislation to grant permanent wilderness status to the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area, which borders the Wheeler Peak Wilderness in the Carson National Forest, the statement said.

Saturday’s meeting, which will take place from 10:45 a.m. to noon at Rivers and Birds on N.M. 150 in Arroyo Seco, is being hosted by Roberta Salazar, founder and executive director of Rivers and Birds, and John Olivas of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance.

The federal lawmakers last week reintroduced a bill to establish the Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Area to protect more than 240,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management-managed lands in Taos and Rio Arriba counties. They also have asked President Barack Obama to consider designating the area a national monument in order to protect the land and wildlife habitat, and to preserve existing uses such as hunting, fishing and grazing.
New Mexico Legislators Step Up to Protect Rio Grande del Norte

Sierra Club – Lay of the Land
2/12/2013
Devin Castles

On Thursday, New Mexican lawmakers took a huge step forward in the ongoing effort to preserve the jewel of New Mexico: Rio Grande del Norte. Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, along with Representative Ben Ray Luján, have reintroduced legislation to protect more than 240,000 acres around the Rio Grande River and the rich wilderness that surrounds it in Northern New Mexico as a National Conservation Area (NCA).

New Mexicans and visitors alike have long been mesmerized by the sites along the Rio Grande, like the 800-foot deep gorge surrounding the river for miles, providing plentiful hideouts for nesting eagles and peregrine falcons.

Apart from being a top destination for adventurers and hikers, Rio Grande del Norte is home to challenging rapids for river rafters and prime locations for fishing and big game hunting - outdoor recreation that contributes $3.8 billion annually to New Mexico's economy and employs 47,000 New Mexicans statewide. It’s estimated that protecting this land would provide even greater economic benefits and create even more jobs for New Mexicans.

As we mentioned here in September, protecting the Rio Grande del Norte is an important priority for local communities in Taos and Rio Arriba Counties, who cherish the land, its wild waters, and the diverse wildlife that rely on the Rio Grande for survival. The overwhelming local backing for designating the Rio Grande del Norte as a national monument was on full display at a packed town hall meeting hosted by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in December, where dozens of community supporters, elected officials and business leaders gathered to show their support.

These communities recognize the cultural significance of the area, as well as its importance to local business and employment.

For all of these reasons, Rio Grande del Norte deserves permanent protection. This legislation is a great step toward that goal – a goal that can be reached by President Obama designating this beautiful landscape as a national monument.

Time and weather have carved some remarkable drawings into the Rio Grande del Norte, and many of the piñon and juniper trees that pepper the surrounding landscape are hundreds of years old. These majestic wilds took ages to build, but could quickly be ruined by overdevelopment. It is good to see elected officials listening to the people of New Mexico, who hope this pristine landscape will be around for ages to come, so future generations can enjoy it as well.
ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) - Some members of New Mexico's congressional delegation are renewing a push to protect more than 240,000 acres of federal land in northern New Mexico.


Efforts to conserve the area - including stretches of the Rio Grande Gorge and Ute Mountain - have been ongoing since 2009. Last October, members of the delegation sent letters to President Barack Obama asking that he consider designating the area for national monument status.

Supporters say the area is historically and culturally significant and offers recreational opportunities that include hunting and fishing. Lujan describes it as "one of the crown jewels" of New Mexico.

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Hunters and Anglers Applaud Reintroduction of Rio Grande del Norte Legislation

Our Public Lands
2/7/2013
Judith Kohler


Under their bill, a new National Conservation Area would be created encompassing a 236,000-acre area managed by the Bureau of Land Management in northern New Mexico. This area includes the Wild and Scenic Rio Grande River Gorge, the 10,093-foot Cerro de Yuta (Ute Mountain) and San Antonio Mountain, protecting important big game migratory corridors along the plateau. With broad local support, New Mexico congressional members have spent years leading efforts to protect these traditions only to be thwarted by congressional grid-lock and partisan posturing.

Proponents have urged President Barack Obama to use his authority under the Antiquities Act to declare the area a national monument.

“With overwhelming support for national monument designation, we’ve been asking the administration to recognize the importance of passing New Mexico’s heritage on to future generations,” said Kent Salazar, a National Wildlife Federation board member whose family has lived and ranched in New Mexico for generations. “We’ve been working on this for 15 years. Hunters and anglers support protecting Rio Grande del Norte. Environmentalists, ranchers and businesses support it. Native Americans have been hunting and fishing in this area forever. There’s mountain biking, hiking and fishing in the area. Tourism is a major part of the northern New Mexico economy and Rio Grande del Norte is key to that.”

Protecting the Rio Grande del Norte is vital to sustaining the area’s culture, heritage and economy, a standing-room-only crowd told the Department of Interior Secretary at a listening session he conducted in December in Taos. Dozens of northern New Mexico residents told the secretary they appreciated the fact that existing uses of the land, including grazing, hunting and fishing, would be allowed to continue if the site is made a national monument. The Rio
Grande, classified as a Wild and Scenic River in 1968, would remain open to kayaking and other activities. More than 150 area businesses and business organizations endorse making the site a national monument.

“While we encourage President Obama to move purposefully with monument designation for El Rio Grande del Norte, we must commend New Mexico’s congressional delegation for their thoughtful leadership and diligent efforts to preserve the integrity of our heritage and traditions by introducing this legislation now and demonstrating stewardship for future generations,” NWF’s Kent Salazar added.

A recent report by BBC Research & Consulting said the estimated $17.2 million pumped into the area economy yearly from tourism and spending related to Rio Grande del Norte would nearly double to $32.2 million with permanent designation.

The area contains thousands of archaeological sites, some dating back 11,000 years. It holds key big game wintering grounds for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn and is also home to bears, cougars, trout, bighorn sheep, raptors, grouse, and is an important stop along the Rio Grande migratory flyway.
New federal bill filed to protect Taos’ Rio Grande del Norte

The Taos News
2/7/2013
Staff

U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, and Rep. Ben Ray Luján have reintroduced legislation in the Senate and House to protect the Río Grande del Norte.

The area includes more than 240,000 acres of BLM-managed lands in Taos and Río Arriba counties.

Since 2009, the three lawmakers and former Sen. Jeff Bingaman have worked with the support of the local communities to pass legislation to designate the lands as a National Conservation Area.

"Some of Northern New Mexico's most historically and culturally rich treasures can be found in these areas," said Udall in a prepared statement. "The residents of Taos and Río Arriba counties have joined us in an effort to protect their incredible landscapes and ensure the lands remain accessible for the benefit of locals and visitors. I was proud to take up this initiative with Jeff Bingaman and we will work to see that the preservation of the Río Grande del Norte is part of his lasting legacy."

"Living in New Mexico we have a special connection with the majestic land we are blessed to live on, and the Rio Grande del Norte is one of the crowning jewels in our state," Luján said in a prepared statement. "Whether it is for recreation or farming, sustaining a way of life or finding inspiration, the Río Grande del Norte impacts all those who visit and all those who live off the sustenance it provides. Protecting this land should be a top priority, and Secretary Salazar’s visit to Taos in December of last year reinforced that there is overwhelming support by the local community to do so."

The House Natural Resources Committee and the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held hearings on the legislation during last Congress.

In October, Bingaman and Udall asked President Obama to consider designating the area for national monument status. Luján and Heinrich also asked the administration to make the area a monument.

In December, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar hosted a public meeting in Taos to explore possible protection of the area. Residents who attended the meeting showed support for protecting the Río Grande Del Norte.
Let’s preserve the great outdoors

Albuquerque Journal
2/4/2013
John Wilson

NOW IS THE time to create the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument in New Mexico. It has wide backing, and no group seems to oppose it. I want you to back it, too.

We New Mexicans live in a biologically and geologically rich state and we love it. I am guessing that you recently spent time outdoors doing something you love. That is just who we are.

There is a push on right now to give special protection to a particularly beloved area.

The Rio Grande del Norte National Monument would be good for the land and all the life on it including us!

It would ensure that hikers, hunters, rafters, birdwatchers, anglers, riders of horses and bikes and all the other users can continue to enjoy it in the future. It would be good for the businesses who serve the needs of those of us who use the land.

It would protect the archaeological sites of those who came before us. It would be good for those who come after us.

This 250,000 acre landscape in northern New Mexico includes the Rio Grande Gorge, snow capped peaks, huge stretches of sagebrush plain. It is worthy of special protection and now is the time to make this happen.

It is time to speak to everybody who can make this happen. This includes your friends and neighbors and your elected officials.

President Obama could make this happen with the stroke of a pen.

JOHN WILSON

Magdalena
This week, Secretary Ken Salazar announced his retirement, bringing an end to his tenure at the Interior Department. As a veteran of the Persian Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom, I'm personally grateful to Secretary Salazar for his leadership in conserving America's lands and, in particular, protecting special places that recognize and pay tribute to our military heritage.

Before Secretary Salazar took the helm, the Interior Department was known more for its rapport with the oil and gas industry than for conserving America's public lands. Thankfully, Secretary Salazar has been a steady hand at the tiller, guiding the Department towards a more balanced approach to managing America's parks and public lands.

He is to be commended for advocating for the economic benefit of adding four new national monuments; establishing seven new national parks, 10 new National Wildlife Refuges, and laying the groundwork to conserve millions of acres as part of the Administration's America's Great Outdoors initiative.

Veterans are particularly grateful to the Secretary for honoring the men and women who have served our country by advocating for the national monument designation of Fort Monroe in Virginia and Fort Ord in California.

Both places are significant to our military heritage. In fact, Fort Ord has a legacy that stretches back almost 100 years; generations of Americans served at the Fort that overlooks Monterey, California with regiments fighting in World War II and protecting California's coastline after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Secretary Salazar visited Fort Ord, listened to the community's input, and advocated for the protection of this special place.

Along with the new national monument at Fort Monroe, these places are protected for generations to come thanks to the leadership of Secretary Salazar. That significance cannot be underestimated. These are the lands that we fought to protect and these national monuments honor that service and pay tribute to our sacrifice.

I hope that during the Secretary's closing chapter at the Interior Department he'll
consider writing three addendums to all that
he's accomplished. For the first two, I
courage the Secretary to advocate for the
permanent protection of Rio Grande del
Norte and the Organ Mountains-Desert
Peaks in New Mexico before his departure.
For the third, I encourage the Secretary to
tavel to California to hear from the local
community about the need to protect the
Point Arena-Stornetta Public Lands in
Mendocino County as part of the California
Coastal National Monument.

The Rio Grande del Norte encompasses Ute
Mountain, a former volcano that rises over
10,000 feet, and a 200-foot-deep, 150-foot-
wide canyon with cliffs that plunge down to
the Rio Grande. This is a place of solitude
and quiet for hiking, hunting and fishing.
Last December, Secretary Salazar visited
and held a listening session with the local
community about protecting Rio Grande del
Norte and was greeted with diverse and
unanimous support for designating a new
national monument.

In southern New Mexico, the call of many
New Mexicans for a national monument
encompassing the Organ Mountains-Desert
Peaks region is also strong and includes
veterans, Hispanic leaders, sportsmen,
businesses, city councils and the Dona Aňa
County Commission. This area provides
outstanding recreational opportunities,
scenery and wildlife habitat, and is home to
thousands of historical and cultural sites.
The Organ, Portillo, Robledo and Sierra de
Las Uvas Mountains are beloved to county
residents, 83 percent of which support
designating these areas as a national
monument, according to a recent poll.

As well, the Point Arena-Stornetta Public
Lands are a place of great natural beauty and
tranquility. Overlooking the Mendocino
Coastline, these lands offer spectacular
views of the ocean, crashing waves and
rocky cliffs. It is a place that offers
perspective and stirs reflection from its
visitors.

Veterans return home with many scars --
some visible and many invisible. Spending
time in the great outdoors -- hiking with
family or friends, fishing or camping -- are
activities that provide calm after years spent
at war. It is places like Rio Grande del Norte
and Point Arena-Stornetta Public Lands that,
for many veterans, provide the first steps
toward healing.

Secretary Salazar will be missed at the
Interior Department. We are looking
forward, however, to working with the next
Secretary and the White House to continue
his legacy of restoring a balanced approach
to managing America's parks and public
lands, protecting as many acres of our
national heritage as are leased to oil and gas
companies. Thanks to Secretary Salazar, the
Department has a clear path forward to
reaching this balance.

I'm honored to speak up in recognition of
Secretary Salazar and the work he's done.
There's a great history of conservation in
this country -- led, in my opinion, by the
great Teddy Roosevelt. His work protecting
America's land shaped the country that we
now know. My thanks go out to Secretary
Salazar for adding to this tradition of
conservation.
Conservation is about balance: balancing the wants of today with the needs of tomorrow; balancing freedom with responsibility; balancing human’s power to harness nature, with respecting nature’s force and wisdom.

Last week, the Center for American Progress pointed out in a report one place where the Obama Administration is out of balance: protecting the best, most valuable corners of America’s public domain.

When it comes to protecting the great outdoors, Obama currently lags far behind President Bush I, Bush II and Ronald Reagan. Of course, Obama has been paired with a particularly dysfunctional Congress that can’t seem to pass water, let alone legislation.

The 112th Congress, which just ended, was the first since 1966 that designated no new wilderness areas. There are many wonderful and threatened places around the country that deserve the honor and have strong local support.

At the same time, the Obama Administration has been setting records for oil and gas development on America’s public lands.

A great place for Obama to begin correcting this imbalance is in New Mexico, with the Rio Grande del Norte. I was in New Mexico in the fall, working with some folks who love to hunt elk and mule deer and fish for trout in this region.

The land is impressive on its own – vast sagebrush plateaus, framed by ancient volcanic cinder cones and cleft by the narrow whitewater canyon of the Rio Grande. I was equally impressed by the broad swath of support from New Mexicans coming together to conserve this special place – not lock it up under glass, but to make sure it remains special and available for people to use and enjoy long into the future.

New Mexicans have drawn up a balanced, visionary proposal that would conserve about 250,000 acres of the Rio Grande del Norte. If Congress is too lost in Beltway politics to listen to the people, Obama should perk up his famous ears and act toward the future.

Ben Long is an author, outdoors and conservationist in Kalispell, Mont. He is senior program director at Resource Media.
Utah rep. opposes Rio Grande del Norte National Monument

Albuquerque Journal
1/3/2013
ABQ News Staff

Following Interior Secretary Ken Salazar’s visit to Taos last month to discuss protecting the Rio Grande del Norte, a Utah congressman announced his opposition to creating a national monument around the area, The Taos News reported.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., has proposed legislation to protect a 236,000-acre area including the Rio Grande Gorge, Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain in Taos and Rio Arriba counties, and both Bingaman and Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., have called on President Barack Obama to create a national monument to protect the area, The News said.

Two days after Salazar’s visit to Taos, Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, who chairs the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, issued a statement opposing the designation, the paper reported.

“It’s nice that Secretary Salazar held a meeting on Saturday, but many would argue that the gathering failed to provide sufficient opportunity for real public input and participation from the community, stakeholders and local leaders,” said the statement from Bishop’s office. “This is not the appropriate course that should be taken when considering new policies and land designations that affect so many livelihoods.”

Bishop’s statement referred to the federal Antiquities Act, which allows the president to create national monuments, as “controversial” and said it was a way to “lock up federal land and resources behind Congress’ back.”

According to a statement from the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, however, Bishop’s “assertion that designating this area as a national monument without sufficient public input reeks of a desperate eleventh-hour attempt to stop presidential action that would help the local economy and be highly popular in New Mexico.”

10:29am 12/14/12 — Secretary Salazar To Hold Public Meeting on Protecting Rio Grande del Norte

By ABQnews Staff

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar will host a public listening session to explore the best path forward to preserve and protect the Rio Grande del Norte in northern New Mexico, according to a press release from the secretary’s office.
On Saturday, Salazar will host the public listening session at 11 a.m. at the Kachina Lodge, 413 Paseo del, Pueblo Norte, in Taos. He will be joined by U.S. Representative Ben Ray Luján and Bureau of Land Management State Director for New Mexico Jesse Juen.

“I look forward to hearing from New Mexicans about what the Río Grande del Norte means to their community and what their vision is for its future,” said Salazar in a statement. “Public lands provide huge economic benefits to communities through tourism and outdoor recreation, and the Río Grande del Norte is no exception. We need to ensure that generations to come have the opportunity to experience this iconic western landscape.”

Located about 30 miles northwest of Taos, the Río Grande del Norte contains stretches of the Río Grande Gorge and Ute Mountain, which rises from the Taos valley floor.
Utah rep. opposes Rio Grande del Norte national monument near Taos

The Taos News
12/30/2012
Matthew van Buren

Following Department of the Interior Secretary Ken Salazar’s visit to Taos Dec. 15 to discuss protecting the Río Grande del Norte, a Utah congressman released a statement opposing creating a national monument around the area.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, has proposed legislation to protect the 236,000-acre area, which includes the Río Grande Gorge, Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain in Taos and Río Arriba counties.

The town of Taos, village of Questa, Taos County Commission, Taos County and Mora Valley chambers of commerce, area businesses, local nonprofit groups, community organizations and land grant associations have lent their support to the conservation effort over the years.

This year, supporters, including Sens. Bingaman and Tom Udall, D-NM, have called for President Obama to create a national monument to protect the area. Two days after Salazar’s visit to Taos, however, U.S. Rep. Rob Bishop, R-UT, issued a statement opposing the action. Bishop chairs the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

“It’s nice that Secretary Salazar held a meeting on Saturday, but many would argue that the gathering failed to provide sufficient opportunity for real public input and participation from the community, stakeholders and local leaders,” a statement from Bishop’s office reads. “This is not the appropriate course that should be taken when considering new policies and land designations that affect so many livelihoods.”

The statement refers to the Antiquities Act, which allows the President to create national monuments, as “controversial” and calls it a way to “lock up federal land and resources behind Congress’ back.”

“Chairman Bingaman’s bill to designate this area failed to advance in his own Democrat-controlled Senate the past two sessions of Congress. This lack of action and urgency raises the question that the area is not immediately threatened or endangered,” Bishop is quoted as saying in the statement. “I do not oppose national monuments, but there is a necessary and appropriate course that must be taken. First and foremost, it is imperative that the impetus for their establishment is not the result of special interest group pressure, but rather strong consensus from the state, local communities, residents, and stakeholders. Second, that designations adhere to the original intent of the Antiquities Act. Finally, that Congress, through the regular legislative process, determine the ultimate designations for the
federal lands in question. I remained concerned that the Administration is using the Antiquities Act to not only circumvent Congress, but also forgo addressing the concerns of those who stand to be affected by this the most.”

The New Mexico Wildlife Federation and others have taken issue with Bishop’s comments, however.

“Contrary to Rep. Bishop’s statements, well-publicized legislation and proposals regarding Rio Grande del Norte have been discussed for several years, with the overwhelming amount of it favoring permanent protection of these vital public lands,” Max Trujillo, of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, said in a statement. “The representative’s assertion that designating this area as a national monument without sufficient public input reeks of a desperate eleventh-hour attempt to stop presidential action that would help the local economy and be highly popular in New Mexico.”

The Federation release also quotes Taos County Commissioner Larry Sánchez as saying a “tremendous amount of public input” has been solicited regarding the Río Grande del Norte.

“That is why there is no local opposition to designating a national monument. That is why the many traditional uses of these public lands are being recognized. Grazing, hunting, fishing, gathering of firewood, piñon and herbs, religious and cultural sites — it would all be protected. Designating Río Grande del Norte as a national monument would also provide badly needed economic growth for this area,” Sánchez is quoted as saying.

“I would be happy to give Rep. Bishop a personal tour of the area to show him directly how much local support there is.”

The release quotes other supporters, including fifth-generation rancher Alex Maestas and Los Ríos River Runners owner Francisco Guevara.

According to the release, Bishop is co-sponsoring legislation, HR 1126, that would sell close to a million acres of public lands in New Mexico “with neither opportunity for input from local communities nor maps of where the lands are located,” including more than 10,000 acres in Taos County.

“It’s no surprise Rep. Bishop opposes the president creating a national monument in New Mexico,” Trujillo is quoted as saying. “This is a man who repeatedly has proposed selling off our public lands, not protecting them.”
Monument protection

The Salt Lake Tribune
12/29/2012
Jim Baca

As a former director of the Bureau of Land Management, I know Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, is entitled to his opinion about the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Monument in my home state of New Mexico. These public lands belong to all Americans, and we all deserve a say, wherever we live.

And just as Bishop cares about New Mexico, I care for America’s redrock wilderness in Utah.

It’s just a shame that Bishop is so poorly informed about the proven economic benefits of protecting public lands. When President Barack Obama designates the Rio Grande del Norte area as a monument, it will better the local economy.

Republican and Democratic presidents have used the Antiquities Act more than a hundred times to protect some of America’s most treasured landscapes as national monuments. National monuments are useful tools to stop threats. Places like Arches and Zion national parks have benefited, as well as the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

I’m saddened that Utah Gov. Gary Herbert is attacking Utah’s federal lands that belong to all of us with his 20 lawsuits against the United States. I hope Obama will help stop that threat by designating the greater Canyonlands region as a national monument.

Jim Baca

Albuquerque, N.M.
Cisco Guevara is the kind of poster child conservationists dream of: A bearded river guide in a floppy black hat who has 400-year-old roots in the area and knows how to spin a yarn.

On Saturday (Dec. 15), Guevara worked his charm on U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar in front of a crowd that came out to show fervent support for protecting a huge swath of northern Taos County.

“I was probably only about 3 years old and I was looking into the kitchen sink,” Guevara told Salazar. “My dad had gone fishing and he was going to feed the whole clan — there were more than 10 of us — with two fish. They were huge. They were going over the edges of the sink. And I said, ‘Dad, where did these fish come from?’ ‘El Río Grande del Norte.’ And from then on, I always wanted to visit that magic place.”

Guevara was one of around 50 people who spoke at the two-hour meeting, which was meant to gather public comment on a proposal to designate 236,000 remote acres in Taos and Río Arriba counties as a conservation area or national monument. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM. was on hand, as was Jesse Juen, state director for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Notice of Salazar’s visit was announced about 24 hours before the meeting began (Salazar’s staff said they were watching the weather to make sure they could make it), but word spread quickly and a standing-room-only audience of nearly 200 people showed up Saturday morning.

The meeting room at the Kachina Lodge was overflowing with Taoseños of nearly every ilk — from artists, to tribal representatives, to hunters, rafters and a troop of uniformed Boy Scouts — all of whom came out to champion the idea.

“We have Indian names for all these places here,” said Taos Pueblo Lt. Gov. Gilbert Suazo, pointing to landmarks on a giant map and reciting the Tiwa name for each. “All of those places are a part of a history, a part of our culture, a part of our tradition. So we are interested in having that area protected.”

Questa Mayor Esther García spoke about the need to safeguard the land while respecting the historic activities of longtime Hispano residents. “For me, protecting El Río Grande del Norte is very important, but I also want to protect the traditional uses of land,” García said. “We are land grant heirs in New Mexico. Grazing is important. The fishing, the hunting, the herb gathering. Everything that has been traditional for my culture is very important to me.”

Outfitter Stuart Wilde said he came to Saturday’s meeting as a scout leader, a local business owner and a lover of Northern New Mexico. “I encourage you to protect
permanently the Río Grande del Norte, whether it’s via a national conservation area or a national monument,” Wilde told Salazar.

After taking comments, Salazar called a vote, asking who was in favor of a presidential proclamation to establish a monument. Every hand in the audience was raised. No one spoke in opposition during the entire event, even after Salazar encouraged any dissenters to give their opinions.

For months community members have lauded the idea of protecting the Río Grande del Norte, arguing that it will preserve a unique environmental and cultural heritage while serving as a tourist draw that will boost the local economy. But at the moment, it’s unclear what approach the federal government may take to accomplish that goal.

The area — a desolate, volcanic plateau bordered on the east and west by mountains — is bisected by the Río Grande Gorge and is a popular destination for sportsmen and outdoors enthusiasts.

New Mexico’s congressional delegation has introduced bills in both the Senate and the House that would create the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area along with two adjacent wilderness areas. However, those bills have made little progress in Congress thanks to legislative deadlock in Washington, D.C.

Salazar, a native of the San Luís Valley, told The Taos News after the meeting that he would be working on determining how best to get some sort of protection in place, be that through Congress or through a presidential action that would bypass the log jam.

“It is a very special place and we’ll look at the appropriate ways of protecting it,” Salazar said.

Salazar declined to give any specific timeline as to when he would offer his recommendations to the President or when a decision might be made.

Obama established two national monuments this fall: César E. Chávez National Monument in California, and Chimney Rock National Monument in Colorado.

The language included in the House and Senate bills would result in almost no immediate changes to the way the Río Grande del Norte area is currently managed. Existing grazing and woodcutting would continue, and mining north of Tres Piedras would be allowed to go on, through it could not expand. If adopted, the legislation dictates that no new road be built inside the conservation area boundaries.

While there is no immediate threat of large-scale development, the bill would essentially stop future growth on public lands in the conservation area, with the idea of preserving the landscape for future generations.

It’s not known whether a presidential proclamation would include the same language, though, based on Saturday’s hearing, many of the comments Salazar will now take to the president include similar stipulations.
Salazar visits Taos to show support for national monument

Backcountry – The Goat
12/18/2012
Michael Frank

A standing-room-only audience turned out in Taos this weekend overwhelmingly in favor of protecting a huge swath of public lands known as the Rio Grande del Norte, a 236,000-acre chunk of BLM land in the northern part of the state that members of New Mexico’s congressional delegation want given national protection. The lawmakers have introduced legislation that would create a monument on both sides of the Rio Grande Gorge. During the two-hour meeting at the Kachina Lodge with Salazar, dozens of local residents spoke about the environmental and cultural importance of the area. While the legislation has made little progress getting through Congress, Salazar told the Taos News after the meeting that he would be working on determining how best to get some sort of protection in place, be that through legislation or through a presidential proclamation. Via Taos News.

Read more stories like this at Adventure Journal.
Worthy of preservation

Santa Fe New Mexican  
12/18/2012  
Editorial

News that Interior Secretary Ken Salazar was in Taos last Saturday to hear comments about how best to preserve the Rio Grande del Norte is sending hearts aflutter across Northern New Mexico. Traditionally, before land is set aside, a last, listening meeting takes place, meaning (cross your fingers) that before the end of 2012, the designation of the Rio Grande del Norte as deserving special protection will happen.

This status would protect some of Northern New Mexico’s most precious outdoors areas, whether for hunting, fishing, rafting, wood cutting, grazing or plain ol’ enjoying. A dream of a wide variety of nortenos, this designation — some 236,000 acres of public land northwest of Taos — also is a fitting tribute to Sen. Jeff Bingaman, who is retiring after 30 years in the Senate. Indian, Hispanic and Anglo peoples of the north, outdoorsmen and conservationists, business owners and environmentalists all have worked together to show the benefits of preserving the area, which contains parts of the Rio Grande Gorge, Ute Mountain and the Taos Plateau; in other words, some of the most spectacular and wild places in New Mexico.

Because the current Congress has been so reluctant to preserve wilderness — this session likely will be the first since 1966 where lawmakers fail to set aside new areas for protection — it could fall to President Barack Obama to use his executive powers instead. Under the Antiquities Act, the president can designate this important recreational and wildlife area as a national monument. Instead of the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, we could have the Rio Grande del Norte Monument. Either works.

We urge the president to follow in the footsteps of conservation pioneer President Teddy Roosevelt, and even President Richard Nixon, both of whom knew the value of the wild. It was Roosevelt who started the practice of setting aside land so the wild core of this nation would not be lost. Nixon was the president who returned the sacred Blue Lake to Taos Pueblo — a victory both for the rights of indigenous peoples and for the land itself. Today, more than ever, this country must preserve the wild, safeguard our water and protect people’s access to nature. Creating the Rio Grande del Norte Monument is in the best tradition of our nation and in the best interests of New Mexico.
Senator Bingaman’s Legacy

As a lifelong resident of New Mexico who has hunted and fished on public lands all over New Mexico and the West, I would like to thank our retiring Sen. Jeff Bingaman for his decades of support of sportsmen and all citizens through his stewardship of our nation’s natural gifts and wild places.

Over the course of Sen. Bingaman’s career, he has introduced or supported dozens of bills that protect New Mexico’s public lands — where the vast majority of the public recreate and sportsmen hunt and fish. Public lands belong to all of us. They’re important to New Mexico because they support thousands of jobs and a multimillion-dollar outdoor recreation economy. In addition, our public lands are important to maintaining the health of our state’s residents and children, providing us with clean air and clean water. We have been blessed to have Sen. Bingaman watching out for our interests over the last 30 years.

His legacy is long, touching almost every corner of the state. But throughout his career he has been an advocate for healthy public lands, for wildlife and the public that depends on them. He has accomplished much. When an issue comes up, he brings everyone to the table, he listens, and then works to get things done. It’s quite an accomplishment, and it’s one reason why New Mexico continues to be a world-class destination for outdoors recreation.

Thanks to the Forest Landscape Restoration Act, for instance, New Mexicans will ultimately restore 210,000 acres in the Southwest Jemez Mountains to sustainable forest conditions. Another important achievement is the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program, which has allowed New Mexicans to restore more than 30,000 acres of public land, create more than 700 jobs and greatly reduce the risk of forest fires.

He has been a champion for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which has provided more than $240 million to help protect New Mexico’s most special places, such as the Valles Caldera and Gila National Forest, and to ensure access for hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. In 2009, he shepherded the Omnibus Public Land Management Act through the Senate, establishing several wilderness areas and national monuments in New Mexico.

And now, along with Sen. Tom Udall and Congressmen Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich, he has asked President Obama to declare two sites in New Mexico as national monuments — Rio Grande del Norte near Taos and the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks region near Las Cruces. These designations would not only protect these iconic vistas, their wildlife and hunting and fishing opportunities, it would create hundreds if not thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in new, sustainable economic activity.
From the Valle Vidal and Valles Caldera in the north to Broad Canyon and the Organ Mountains in the south and many places in between, Sen. Bingaman has left his mark by helping to protect many of our most treasured public lands for present and future generations. As he retires as our senator, it is a fitting time for all of us to thank him for his positive impact on our state.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman may leave office but he is not leaving New Mexico. As evidenced by his effort to create new monuments in New Mexico in his last weeks in office, he will continue to work to make New Mexico a great place to live and explore. And his rare devotion to New Mexico and public lands ensures that his legacy will last for generations.

Kent Salazar is former president of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation and a former State Game Commissioner. He is currently chairman of the Valles Caldera Trust and a regional representative of the National Wildlife Federation.
Salazar mulls monument proposal for N.M.’s Rio Grande

Environment & Energy Publishing
12/17/2012
Phil Taylor

A meeting of top Interior Department officials two days ago in New Mexico has raised hopes that the White House will declare a national monument to protect a rugged river gorge and sagebrush mesa near the state's border with Colorado.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar heard from dozens of local residents during a standing-room-only meeting Saturday at the Kachina Lodge in Taos to discuss protecting the Rio Grande del Norte, an area prized by sportsmen, hikers and tribes for its wildlife and sacred values.

The area is marked by volcanic cones and the Ute Mountain jutting up from the surrounding valley and provides habitat for elk, bighorn sheep, bald eagles, falcons and great horned owls.

For conservationists, the meeting marked the administration's first official step toward using the Antiquities Act to designate the 236,000-acre Rio Grande Gorge and Taos Plateau as a national monument.

"I think the landscape and the resources there are absolutely worthy of protection," said Brian O'Donnell, executive director of the Durango, Colo.-based Conservation Lands Foundation, who attended Saturday's meeting.

According to O'Donnell, Salazar at one point in the meeting asked for a show of hands of those who support a national monument designation, and almost all hands went up. None was raised after Salazar asked who opposed such a designation, O'Donnell said. Salazar said he was there to take the opinion of the community back to the president.

He was accompanied by Neil Kornze, acting deputy director for policy and programs at the Bureau of Land Management, which administers the area, O'Donnell said. The meeting also included BLM New Mexico State Director Jesse Juen and Rep. Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.), who has introduced H.R. 1241 to protect the land as a national conservation area.

While Luján's bill carries the support of BLM and there is companion legislation sponsored in the Senate by New Mexico Democratic Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, few expect the legislation to pass both chambers during the fiscal talks of the lame duck. The lawmakers in recent months have suggested that a national monument is the only viable path forward amid the partisan dysfunction in Congress (E&ENews PM, Oct. 26).

Such a move would mark the first landscape-scale monument designation for President Obama, whose first four monuments in Virginia, California and Colorado protected
historic forts, archaeological sites and the home of labor leader César Chávez.

If designated, a monument would be expected to follow the contours of the New Mexico lawmakers’ bill.

"The Rio Grande del Norte is one of the crowning jewels in our state," Luján said after the meeting. "The people of Taos and the surrounding communities made it clear to Secretary Salazar today that protecting this beautiful land should be a top priority."

Luján said his staff had met extensively with local ranchers, conservationists and other constituents to ensure the preservation of traditional land uses, including grazing and the gathering of pinyon nuts, wild herbs and firewood.

A monument is backed by Taos County and the Taos and Mora Valley chambers of commerce as well as sportsmen's, conservation and Latino groups and some ranchers.

In a sign of the administration's support, BLM last fall included the area in a report to Congress identifying 18 backcountry areas deserving of protections as national conservation areas or wilderness (E&ENews PM, Nov. 10, 2011).

The report said that blue-ribbon trout fishing in the Rio Grande and its tributaries attracts fishermen from across the country and that public lands in New Mexico are responsible for about $350 million in annual recreation-related economic output.

"Public lands provide huge economic benefits to communities through tourism and outdoor recreation, and the Rio Grande del Norte is no exception," Salazar said Friday. "We need to ensure that generations to come have the opportunity to experience this iconic Western landscape."

The White House is likely to move cautiously on new designations, which are viewed with skepticism by some Western Republicans who have moved to block other Interior conservation policies.

Some critics argue that presidents have abused their authority and exceeded the original intent of the Antiquities Act, which is to allow the executive branch to prevent archaeological, geological and scientific wonders from imminent threats, such as plunder or looting. A key provision in the law states that monuments should use the smallest footprint necessary to protect the resource at hand, Rep. Rob Bishop (R-Utah), chairman of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, has said in the past.

While President Clinton designated or expanded more than 20 national monuments during his eight years in office, perhaps his best-known move was the 1.9-million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah, which he declared in September 1996, sowing distrust among Utah lawmakers to this day.

The vast majority of Clinton's designations happened in his second term, and most were vetted through a transparent public process.

Conservationists are lobbying the president to designate bigger monuments in his second term, including in New Mexico's Organ Mountains in Doña Ana County, in addition to a 1.7 million-acre watershed north of the Grand Canyon, the Tule Springs in Las Vegas and Colorado's Browns Canyon.
A standing-room-only audience turned out in Taos Saturday (Dec. 15) to show overwhelming support for protecting a huge swath of public lands known as the Rio Grande del Norte.

U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar took comments from residents regarding a proposal to provide added federal protection to an area that straddles northern Taos and Rio Arriba counties.

Salazar was joined at the meeting by Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M. Also present were Taos Pueblo Gov. Laureano Romero and Lt. Gov. Gilbert Suazo.

During the two-hour meeting at the Kachina Lodge, dozens of local residents spoke about the environmental and cultural importance of the area. All those who gave comments were in favor of added protection.

Members of New Mexico's congressional delegation have introduced legislation that would create a 236,000-acre conservation area along both sides of the Rio Grande Gorge. However, the legislation has made little progress getting through Congress.

Salazar told The Taos News after the meeting that he would be working on determining how best to get some sort of protection in place, be that through legislation or through a presidential proclamation.

"I think there is huge support for a designation that will protect this place," Salazar said.

For more on this story, see the Dec. 20 edition of The Taos News.
Growing up in northern New Mexico the public lands were my backyard. When I was young, my family took trips to the nearby town of Taos. I remember standing on the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge at age five, looking down steep black canyon walls to a green ribbon of river hundreds of feet below. I remember blue snow-capped mountains rising above, even taller than my beloved Sangre de Cristos near Santa Fe. The land became a part of my personal history, a part of me. Later I learned the name for this memorable place near Taos and its surrounding plains and peaks – Rio Grande del Norte.

Rio Grande del Norte, a 236,000 acre area south of the Colorado border, continues to be a special place to me and tens of thousands of locals and visitors. The region provides excellent fishing, hunting, and backcountry recreation, and the best whitewater rafting in the state. Locals in this predominantly Hispanic area are working together to protect Rio Grande del Norte, and the Sierra Club is part of a coalition of partners urging President Obama for national monument designation. Designation would not only protect the land, it would provide protection to ancient archeological sites (such as petroglyphs dating back over 3,000 years) and honor traditional land uses such as the gathering of pinon nuts, while protecting a critical bird flyway and important wildlife habitat.
Ben Ray Lujan speaks in support of protection of Rio Grande del Norte during the launch of the campaign’s “The Rio Grande del Norte: 100 New Mexicans Speak for a Legacy” book launch.

In addition to protecting one of the state’s most treasured landscapes, the prospect of a national monument designation also provides other opportunities during what have been tough times for this region. As the ‘fiscal cliff’ approaches, a Rio Grande del Norte National Monument represents a ray of economic hope in an otherwise bleak storyline; a recent study by the Denver-based BBC Research and Consulting found that national monument designation of this special place would bring in an estimated $15.7 million annually, and provide over 270 jobs. For a county with a 28%[ii] poverty rate, this is big economic news.

At a Glance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of people in Taos County living below the poverty line (2009 data)</th>
<th>28.5%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimated economic boon to the local economy through designation of El Rio Grande del Norte National Monument</td>
<td>Over $15 million annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated number of jobs created</td>
<td>270</td>
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In times of uncertainty, this sounds like a win-win—protecting special places while ensuring local communities not just survive, but grow and thrive.
New Mexico sportsmen give thanks for Senator Bingaman

As New Mexicans appreciated their many blessings this holiday season, people who love the land offered more than a passing nod to Sen. Jeff Bingaman. Retiring after three decades in the U.S. Senate, Bingaman is leaving a legacy you can see as you travel the state by air, land or water.

New Mexico Sen. Tom Udall says he will miss his friend and mentor.

"For three decades in the Senate, he has really made a difference for New Mexicans and for the American people. One of the areas has been conservation. As he's going out of office, he's pushing for three national monuments that we've been working on for a long time, and I hope we can get those done to secure them for his legacy."

Those monuments include Rio Grande del Norte and Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks. Bingaman helped protect more than 30 mountains, canyons and wilderness areas, including Valles Caldera, El Malpais and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River. He also championed landmark conservation legislation including the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Toner Mitchell, who once served on the senator's staff and is president of Trout Unlimited in Truchas, says he appreciates Bingaman's interest in preservation issues even as the senator was instrumental in formulating national energy policy.

"He's working both with oil and gas and with conservation groups and managing to navigate both areas really well. I appreciated his optimism that things could be worked out."

Kent Salazar, board member of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, says the humble senator seldom encourages others to laud his praises, but has left an inheritance to those in the Land of Enchantment.

"There's just something about being in the wilderness, or getting to the mountains, or going to a national park or preserve, that adds a critical element to our busy lives, now that we're so urbanized. I want to thank him for thinking about that in doing all this."

Panoramas of some of the places Bingaman helped protect, plus interviews, are in a video produced for New Mexico Sportsmen by Tight Line Media. It can be seen at www.publicnewsservice.org or at www.nmwildlife.org.
Sportsmen produce video honoring Sen. Bingaman's public lands legacy

Albuquerque Journal
11/29/2012
Michael Coleman

The New Mexico Wildlife Federation and Trout Unlimited have released a video tribute to retiring Sen. Jeff Bingaman that explores the Democrat’s commitment to land conservation.

The 8-minute video includes some gorgeous shots of the New Mexico landscape, which I enjoyed sitting at my desk in Washington, D.C.

The video can be viewed here.

Here are some excerpts from a press release that accompanied the video:

“New Mexico is a better place thanks to Senator Bingaman’s tireless and thoughtful efforts to protect public lands,” said Kent Salazar, a lifelong Albuquerque hunter and angler and former president of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. “His hard work in Congress has improved and protected outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing and hiking for sportsmen like me. Thanks to his efforts, Senator Bingaman has helped ensure that all New Mexicans have the opportunity to enjoy our state’s natural gifts.”

Senator Bingaman has been a consistent champion for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which has provided more than $243 million to help protect special places throughout the state and has helped ensure access across New Mexico for hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities.

Bingaman also worked to establish the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program, which has funded 166 forest restoration projects in New Mexico since 2001. The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009, also supported by Senator Bingaman, protected more than 2 million acres of public land across the United States.

“By championing conservation legislation, Bingaman has ensured that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy the best public lands in New Mexico as part of their heritage,” said Toner Mitchell, president of the Truchas Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

Despite announcing his retirement in 2011, Senator Bingaman has continued to focus on New Mexico’s public lands for the sake of future generations by calling for two new national monuments in the state.
“Senator Bingaman recognizes the importance of New Mexico’s public lands, and he continues to advocate for their protection,” said Salazar. “As residents of New Mexico, we all benefit from protection of our wild places. Senator Bingaman wants us to continue to enjoy these activities, and that’s why he’s done the hard part of speaking for us in Washington. His conservation legacy in the Land of Enchantment will never fade.”
A Rio Grande del Norte national monument makes economic sense

The Taos News
11/21/2012
Adriana Blake

The north central part of New Mexico thrives on the beauty of the land. It sustains our culture and way of life. Business owners in this area are more aware than ever of how important it is that people experience the mountains, waters and wildlife that make Northern New Mexico so special.

Just 30 miles northwest of Taos, there is another treasure: Río Grande del Norte. This area has long been known for the awe-inspiring Río Grande Gorge, the soaring Ute Mountain and the vibrant Taos Plateau.

Today, I support the movement to ask President Obama to protect this special place by designating it as Río Grande del Norte National Monument.

Río Grande del Norte offers exceptional outdoor recreation opportunities. People near and far come to Río Grande del Norte to hike, swim, paddle, camp, bike, horseback ride, fish and hunt. Río Grande del Norte serves as a nesting ground and migratory route for a variety of bird species, such as wild geese, sandhill cranes, golden eagles and peregrine falcons. It is also home to bighorn and pronghorn sheep, elk and deer. The animals and people alike benefit from the clean water that stems from the Río Grande, providing acequias and farmers with needed water supplies.

It is for all these incredible resources that Northern New Mexicans from all walks of like are working together to protect Río Grande del Norte. Over 100 businesses, in addition to the Taos County and Mora Valley Chambers of Commerce, sportsmen, ranchers, the Taos Town Council and Taos County Commission, members of local traditional communities and local, state and federal elected officials are searching for a way to protect this treasure in Northern New Mexico.

Northern New Mexicans are asking for a Río Grande del Norte National Monument because it makes economic sense. According to a recent study by an economic research firm, a national monument could add $15 million annually to our local economy and create 279 jobs. This growth is on top of the $3.8 billion that outdoor recreation already contributes to New Mexico’s economy annually and the 47,000 New Mexico jobs it supports.

Senators. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and Reps. Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich have been working on legislation to protect Río Grande del Norte. However, the bills are stalled in Congress, so our elected officials have asked President Obama to protect the area by using the Antiquities Act.
The president of the United States can protect special natural and cultural places with the Antiquities Act, a law that is over 100 years old. American icons, like the Statue of Liberty and the Grand Canyon, have been protected by the Antiquities Act, as have the Aztec Ruins and Bandelier National Monuments right here in New Mexico.

People come to Northern New Mexico to experience all that our great outdoors have to offer. Making sure that Río Grande del Norte is protected as a national monument would only increase the value of our land, boost our local economy, and protect our home for future generations to enjoy.

Adriana Blake is the administrative manager at Taos Ski Valley and treasurer of the Taos County Chamber of Commerce.
My View: President Obama should protect el norte

Santa Fe New Mexican
11/10/12
Esther Garcia and Darren Cordova

As mayors of Questa and Taos, the health, welfare and economic stability of our citizens is of the utmost importance to us. Every decision we make is driven by those three benchmarks. This is why we both strongly support a Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. Rio Grande del Norte holds some of the most culturally and naturally significant lands in Northern New Mexico. The area is tied to our family and community heritage and traditions. We heard nostalgic and exciting stories about these incredible lands from our grandparents and experienced them firsthand with our parents. The Rio Grande Gorge, Ute Mountain and Rio San Antonio all offer current and future generations of New Mexicans the opportunity to literally walk in our ancestors’ footsteps while experiencing all of the natural beauty Rio Grande del Norte has to offer.

A Rio Grande del Norte National Monument would safeguard existing user rights on the lands, protecting people’s rights to graze livestock, continue hunting and fishing traditions, and enjoy the mountains with their families. It is equally important to protect religious and cultural sites and protect the traditions of Pueblo members. A Rio Grande del Norte National Monument would spur economic growth in Northern New Mexico. According to a recent study, a national monument would fuel an estimated $15 million in new economic benefits for Northern New Mexico by boosting tourism and supporting ongoing grazing. This growth is on top of the $3.8 billion that outdoor recreation already brings into New Mexico’s economy annually that supports 47,000 jobs across the state.

It is no wonder these figures are so high. People near and far come to Rio Grande del Norte to hike, camp, swim, paddle, bike, fish and hunt.

The Rio Grande del Norte National Monument would also protect critical water sources for Northern New Mexico, such as the Rio Grande. These waters sustain us, giving us clean drinking water and are an important source of irrigation for farmers and acequias. Our water is our lifeblood, and it is our responsibility to protect it for future generations.

With the stroke of a pen, President Barack Obama could protect this incredible area by using the Antiquities Act — a time-tested law that has been used by both Republican and Democratic presidents to protect places across the U.S., such as the Grand Canyon and Statue of Liberty.
Legislation to protect the Rio Grande del Norte has already been introduced by Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall in the Senate, and by Reps. Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich in the House. The monument proposal and legislation is supported by local business owners, the Taos and Mora Valley Chambers of Commerce, sportsmen, ranchers, elected officials at the local and state levels — including the Taos Town Council and Taos County Commission — and members of local traditional communities.

Yet, the legislation is stalled in Congress, along with other community-driven wilderness legislation. And unless Congress passes legislation to protect Rio Grande del Norte, this important place will remain vulnerable to threats. Also, if Congress fails to act on Rio Grande del Norte and the other stalled wilderness bills, it will be the first Congress since 1966 to not protect wilderness.

People from all walks of life have come together to protect Rio Grande del Norte. In separate letters to President Obama, Luján, Heinrich, Bingaman and Udall, people have asked the president to protect this significant place. For the sake of our people, our land and our future, we are also asking President Obama to designate Rio Grande del Norte National Monument this year.

Esther Garcia is mayor of Questa and Darren Cordova is the mayor of Taos.

http://www.santafenewmexican.com/Opinion/myview/111112SUNvuecordova
Unite to Protect Land

A few weeks back, I joined my good friends, Gia Mondragon and his son-in-law, Mark Casias, on a public lands elk hunt in the Rio Grande del Norte. On the opening day of the hunt, we stopped for lunch and sat atop a massive basalt boulder munching on delicious homemade tortillas and deer carne seca.

A magnificent vista lay before us. Below was the awe-inspiring wild plateau of grass and sagebrush mesas severed by the Rio Grande Gorge. The Gorge’s towering basalt cliffs cut a stark line among the multitude of extinct volcanic cinder cones and domes that bear names like Tres Orejas and Cerro Montoso, just to name a few. Each one of these landmarks holds a multitude of past hunting tales for both my companions.

Mondragon leaned back on an elbow and spun a breathtaking real-life blood and thunder tale of his great-grandfather’s annual caravan pilgrimage over the Sangre de Cristos to hunt buffalo on the once wild and unbroken plains east of Cimarron. He ended his yarn with a poignant statement about being part of an unbroken local thread of hunting tradition spanning at least 11,000 years, when the Llano culture first settled in the upper Rio Grande valley. That takes us to 8988 B.C.

Mark and Gia, like so many New Mexicans, are multigenerational people of the land. Old-school predators in the web of life with deadly intent as pure and natural as the elusive cougars that roam the very rocky outcrops we chose for our lunch stop. Hunting, for my friends, is no mere sport. It is a core cultural value that sits near and dear to the heart. It is an integral part of an age-old lifestyle of self-reliance, connectedness and living off the land. This lifestyle is truly the essence of traditional New Mexican existence. Without ample public lands and healthy, viable ecosystems, the continuance of this authentic lifestyle will simply not be possible. If this dies, so dies the soul of our splendidly heterogeneous state.

The people of New Mexico have supported federal protection of these irreplaceable lands for nearly two
decades. Bipartisan grassroots efforts from sportsmen, grazing permittees, the land grant community, county commissioners, village councils and myriad other stakeholders have been under way since the late 1980s.

Protecting these lands makes a great deal of economic sense. Thousands of sportsmen from all over the world come to hunt and fish Rio Grande del Norte every year, bringing in considerable profits and job opportunities for a multitude of local businesses. The Rio Grande del Norte is a sustainable and dependable fiscal asset that adds greatly to Northern New Mexico’s economy.

New Mexico’s sportsmen contribute more than $326 million each year to our economy and support some 8,000 jobs. A recent independent economic report from BBC Consulting estimated that protection of Rio Grande del Norte would generate more than $32 million in recreation-based revenue annually for our state. This is a sustainable economic driver desperately needed in Northern New Mexico.

Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, Congressmen Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Luján, we appreciate your tireless work to protect these spectacular areas, including your sponsoring and continued efforts to advance S. 667 and H.R. 1241. We share your desire to see the Rio Grande del Norte area permanently protected, and we continue to urge the passage of the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act. Given the challenges facing public lands legislation this Congress, we are also grateful for your recent letter to President Barack Obama expressing support for protecting the Rio Grande del Norte as a national monument. We look forward to working with you and the administration over the coming months to ensure the permanent protection of this outstanding resource.

*A native New Mexican, Garrett VeneKlasen is a conservative conservationist acting as the New Mexico Public Lands Coordinator for Trout Unlimited.*
Letters: Giving thanks for wildlife protection

Albuquerque Journal
11/7/2012
John Wilson

On behalf of all the sportsmen in Northern New Mexico and all of New Mexico for that matter, I want to send out a sincere thank you to our esteemed Sens. Bingaman and Udall and Reps. Heinrich and Lujan for taking another step forward in protecting the Rio Grande del Norte. The wildlife habitat and coldwater fishery located in this area are well worth protecting for future generations.

It is not only the people from Taos and Northern New Mexico who will benefit from this protection. People from around the globe who come to experience the natural spectacle that is the Rio Grande del Norte will benefit as well.

As time goes on and our public lands are compromised and destroyed by mining and drilling, the world will have a place to visit that will be as it was for thousands of years. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to say “I caught my first brown trout in Rio Grande del Norte” or “I saw a wild bighorn sheep or mule deer there” or “I heard an elk bugle or a coyote howl.” Somebody from New York City can say they heard the echo of the Rio Grande inside the gorge instead of the echos of traffic from inside the concrete jungle they came here to escape.

Thank you, senators and representatives, for realizing how important protecting our land and water is and for having the vision for our future to take necessary action now.

JOHN WILSON

El Prado
I was glad to see our New Mexico senators taking the initiative to seek permanent protection for two important areas for sportsmen like me, the Rio Grande del Norte and the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks area near Las Cruces.

Hunting and fishing are part of the fabric of New Mexico life, but it's not as easy as it once was to find good places to hunt and fish. And it will be even harder in the future unless we protect key areas like the Rio Grande where it runs through the Gorge, the plateau between San Antonio and Ute Mountains and the Potrillos, Organ, Sierra de Las Uvas and Robledo Mountains outside Las Cruces.

My thanks go to Sens. Bingaman and Udall for asking President Obama to designate both areas as national monuments. Here's hoping the president follows our senators' recommendation and permanently protects those two important areas.

JOHN N. CORNELL

President Doña Ana County Associated Sportsmen

Las Cruces
What the Rio Grande del Norte means to me

Mark Casias
Taos News
11/2/2012

Across the West, there are examples of communities that have lost their natural areas and access to prized hunting and fishing areas and river ways because of reckless development. If this were to happen here, it would leave a scar, not only on our lands, but in our hearts. Let us keep the Río Grande del Norte the way it was intended so our kids and grandkids can also stand around the campfires and pass on the stories they heard, along with their own stories, to the next generations to come. Let us permanently protect these lands and rivers along with their given names that go as far back as the time of the Spaniards.

The Río Grande del Norte is not only important to local cultural traditions and history; it is also a national treasure that clearly deserves protection. With that in mind, I want to thank Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall for their work to protect this area, including asking President Obama to designate Río Grande del Norte as a National Monument. This is the right thing to do to protect and preserve our heritage for generations.

I am Mark Casias, a user of these lands, as a kid and adult. I feed my family with game, rabbits, deer, elk and antelope, and I use the wood for winter heat.

To me, the Río Grande del Norte means star-filled nights, standing around the fire in hunting camp, listening to our dads telling stories about their childhood experiences with friends and family: How they hiked down the bajada of the Río Grande to fish, how they hunted for the winter supply of venison that they dried because there was no refrigeration.

They also hauled wood in “carro de caballo,” using just axes. This was their money for “gold,” not the gold we know now, but gold as in corn that they traded with the Taos Pueblo Indians to feed their hogs, chickens and other farm animals.

These lands are my family’s heritage, our livelihood and survival.
U.S. Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall have asked President Obama to consider designating two areas in New Mexico – already managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) – for national monument status.

The senators are the sponsors of legislation that would elevate these two places – the Rio Grande Gorge and adjacent Taos Plateau, and the Organ Mountains and other public lands in Doña Ana County – to National Conservation Areas (NCAs) and wilderness areas.

In a letter to the president, the senators acknowledged it has been difficult to pass legislation in this Congress and asked the president to consider exercising his authority to establish national monuments, granted to presidents by Congress in the Antiquities Act.

“We will continue to work to advance legislation in the Senate to conserve these important areas in New Mexico, but in the absence of any certainty about the passage of legislation, we believe you should work with local communities to explore how a national monument designation would protect the archeological and cultural resources in these two regions,” the senators wrote. “Since the legislation has been carefully crafted to secure broad support, we request that you carefully consider these proposals.”

National monument status, similar to a NCA designation, would allow these lands and wildlife habitat to be protected for the future, while preserving existing uses such as hunting, fishing and grazing, according to a joint press release from the senators.

The senators are sponsors of legislation that seeks to create wilderness and conservation areas in Doña Ana County and still provide for continued public use while protecting the granite peaks of the Organ Mountains and the volcanic cinder cones of the Potrillo Mountains, among other public lands in the county.

Other national monuments in New Mexico designated by past presidents include Carlsbad Caverns, White Sands, Bandelier, Chaco Canyon, Gila Cliff Dwellings, and Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks – all of which, the senators said, have provided significant economic and educational contributions to New Mexico.
During a visit to the Las Cruces Bulletin Friday, Oct. 26, Udall said he and Bingaman sent the letter because the support for the national monument designation had reached “critical mass.”
Sens. seek Rio Grande monument status

Taos News
11/1/2012
Mathew van Buren

Citing broad local support and uncertainty about Congressional action, U.S. Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, D-NM, are calling on President Obama to designate two national monuments in New Mexico — including one to protect the Río Grande Corridor.

According to a joint press release, Bingaman and Udall hope Obama will use his powers under the Antiquities Act to create national monuments around the Gorge and public lands, including the Organ Mountains, in Doña Ana County.

“National Monument status, similar to a National Conservation Area designation, would allow these lands and their important wildlife habitat to be protected for the future, while preserving existing uses such as hunting, fishing and grazing,” the release states. “Other National Monuments in the state designated by past presidents include Carlsbad Caverns, White Sands, Bandelier, Chaco Canyon, Gila Cliff Dwellings and Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks — all of which have provided significant economic and educational contributions to New Mexico.”

Bingaman introduced, and Udall cosponsored, the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act at the end of March 2011. The conservation area would comprise about 235,980 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), including two new wildernesses: the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta around Ute Mountain in Taos County and the 8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness around San Antonio Mountain in Rio Arriba County.

Bingaman has been trying to pass the legislation before he retires at the end of the year. And, according to the letter Bingaman and Udall sent to Obama, Oct. 25, they will “continue to work to advance legislation in the Senate to conserve these important areas in New Mexico, but in the absence of any certainty about the passage of legislation, we believe you should work with local communities to explore how a National Monument designation would protect the archaeological and cultural resources in these two regions. Since the legislation has been carefully crafted to secure broad support, we request that you carefully consider these proposals.”

Local support

Local conservation groups have been working to bring attention to and otherwise advance the Río Grande del Norte legislation.

Trout Unlimited’s Garrett VeneKlasen said the Río Grande del Norte contains
the state’s “finest and most iconic wild trout fishery,” and national monument status for the area would make economic sense.

“Permanent protection of this area will ensure that this one-of-a-kind angling heirloom will remain pristine and viable for generations to come,” he said. “New Mexicans’ overwhelming support for protecting the Río Grande del Norte should not be thwarted by a dysfunctional Congress.”

According to information from the Taos County Chamber of Commerce, a monument designation for the Río Grande del Norte could provide the local economy with a $15 million boost and create 279 jobs — information shown by a new independent economic study by BBC Research and Consulting.

“A public land designation, such as a national monument, may signal enhanced quality of a potential visitor experience, substantially increasing visitation,” the study states.

According to the Chamber release, more than 100 local businesses support permanent protection for the area.

“Protecting Río Grande del Norte as a national monument clearly makes good business sense,” Chamber chairman Brad Malone is quoted as saying. “This study suggests that recognizing the area as a national monument should bring more folks from across the country and around the world here to visit.” Los Ríos River Runners owner Francisco Guevara is also in favor of the measure.

“In addition to supporting our heritage, the Rio Grande is also the lifeline for many small businesses like mine in rural communities throughout New Mexico,” he is quoted as saying. “Recreation-based businesses rely on the Río Grande to support rafting, fishing and hunting trips. These activities also support restaurants, lodges, gas stations, outfitters and guides, in addition to contributing to the local tax base.”

Outfitter Stuart Wilde, with Wild Earth Llama Adventures, said he supports efforts to protect the Río Grande del Norte area. “It’s great to see that our elected officials are so responsive to our ongoing local efforts and broad-based support to protect the Río Grande Gorge,” he said. “Thanks to Sens. Bingaman and Udall for working to protect New Mexico’s special places.”

Nick Streit, local fly-fishing guide and owner of the Taos Fly Shop, said he doesn’t have faith that Congress will act to protect the Río Grande. He said national monument status would be appropriate for the area, particularly because of the support the idea has locally.

“Northern New Mexico seems to be 100 percent for this. There’s no opposition,” he said. “Having the Río Grande Corridor protected is of monumental importance for Northern New Mexicans, for our tradition and for our livelihoods, in my case, and for our future generations.”

The New Mexico Wildlife Federation also supports the call for the national monuments, touting their value to hunters and anglers in an Oct. 26 announcement.
“Residents of Northern New Mexico have used this area for centuries to feed their families and pass on the hunting tradition,” Taos hunting guide Mark Casias is quoted as saying in the Federation release. “As a national monument, we can be assured that those uses will continue on into the future.”

‘The most anti-wilderness Congress in history’

Río Grande del Norte legislation has been placed on the Senate legislative calendar after moving through the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Hearings regarding the proposed National Conservation Area were held by the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, as well.

However, despite pending legislation that seeks to protect a number of areas in New Mexico and elsewhere, the Wilderness Society circulated an announcement calling the current Congress “the most anti-wilderness Congress in history.” According to information from New Mexico State Director Michael Casaus, if it fails to take action on any of the wilderness bills that have been introduced, this will be the first Congress since 1966 to fail to protect a single acre of wilderness.

“The House in particular has refused to allow a vote on a single wilderness bill, blocking nearly two dozen wilderness bills authorized by Democrats and Republicans alike,” the Society’s announcement states.

The proposal has the support of Taos town and county leaders, as well. County commissioners Nick Jaramillo and Larry Sánchez are quoted as supporting the effort in an Oct. 29 release from the Strategies 360 public relations firm, and the Town Council passed a resolution Oct. 23 that endorses the permanent protection of the Río Grande del Norte.

The resolution notes the “scenic, environmental, economic, cultural and recreational value to Taos and Río Arriba counties,” as well as the unique nature of the area and its importance as a watershed. Mayor Darren Córdova told The Taos News Tuesday (Oct. 30) he is happy to support the initiative. “It’s something that we all can be proud of here in Northern New Mexico,” he said.

In Doña Ana County, according to the senators’ press release, Bingaman and Udall propose to protect with national monument status areas including “the granite peaks of the Organ Mountains and the volcanic cinder cones of the Potrillo Mountains, among other public lands in the county.” Bingaman introduced legislation May 19, 2011, that seeks to create eight new wildernesses, totaling 241,200 acres and ranging in size from 9,600 acres to 125,850 acres, as well as two National Conservation Areas — Desert Peaks, 75,550 acres, and Organ Mountains, 84,000 acres — in Doña Ana County.

According to a description of the Organs in Robert Julyan’s book “The Mountains of New Mexico,” the elevation ranges from about 4,600-9,000 feet, with ecosystems rising from Chihuahuan desert to Ponderosa pine and isolated Douglas and white fir. The rugged peaks are popular with rock climbers: The mountains got their name because of the “vertically jointed granite, dominating the range’s central portion.”
“When Governor (Antonio de) Otermin passed by in 1682, he referred to them as Los Organos, for their resemblance to organ pipes,” Julyan wrote.

In an interview with The Taos News, Casaus said he has “no idea” why wilderness legislation is being held up in Congress.

“Why wilderness is now becoming a partisan issue is unknown to me,” he said.

Indeed, U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, R-NM, introduced an act to protect the Organ Mountains in March. The legislation seeks to “conserve, protect and enhance the cultural, traditional, archaeological, natural, ecological, geological, historical, wildlife, livestock, watershed, educational, recreational and scenic resources” of a 58,512-acre area.

Casaus said there is still hope that this Congress could act.

“We just hope that they’ll listen to their constituents and pass these very important conservation proposals,” he said.

In April, Bingaman introduced legislation to give full wilderness designation to the 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area, north of Taos. The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act was referred to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources; the area was not included in the senators’ request for national monument status.
In the race to fill the seat of retiring Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), candidates Martin Heinrich and Heather Wilson have scrapped over the fate of oil, gas and coal in the state, and they’ve tangled over who’s to blame for job losses, and dwindling funding at New Mexico’s military bases and national labs.

Given the focus on economic issues and Taos’ left-leaning tendencies, it’s probably not surprising that the candidates haven’t spent much time campaigning in the staunchly Democratic north. Nearly 90 percent of Taos County voters supported Bingaman when he last ran in 2006, and Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, walked away with 85 percent of the vote in 2008.

Plus, without a major industry beyond tourism, talk about coal mining and lab funding might not resonate here like it does elsewhere. But that doesn’t mean the outcome of the race won’t affect life for Taos County residents.

In recent interviews with The Taos News, Heinrich and Wilson explained their positions on issues relevant to the future of the Taos region.

Tourism and public lands

Heinrich, who has represented the Albuquerque area in the U.S. House since 2008, is a big supporter of the proposed Hondo-Columbine Wilderness Area and Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Area. He argues that the two designations would not only preserve Taos County’s landscapes, but bolster tourism as well.

“[Taos] is truly one of the most beautiful places in the entire Mountain West, and we need to protect that as an engine of economic development, as something that keeps our outfitter guides working and drives the tourism industry,” Heinrich said.

By literally putting these areas on the map, Heinrich says it will draw visitors looking for a new place to spend a vacation. “It’s very much about protecting what is truly unique about Taos County and the things that draw people to Taos County.”

Heinrich was a co-sponsor with Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, on the House bill to create the conservation area. This July, Heinrich also introduced a bill that would improve access to public lands for hunters and fisherman.
“When you look at the impact that hunting and fishing have on the Taos economy, they’re absolutely critical,” Heinrich said.

Heinrich’s long-standing position on conservation issues has earned him the endorsement of the Sierra Club as well as Conservation Voters of New Mexico. His campaign has also received more than $150,000 in contributions from environmental groups.

Wilson did not explicitly say whether she would support legislation for the proposed protected areas. She said she would be sure to consult with local officials before taking a side on the issue. “My approach to public land issues is to work with local leaders, resolve problems and disputes, and find consensus. And I’ve actually been very successful,” Wilson said.

Among examples of her work while in Congress from 1998-2006, Wilson pointed to the Valle Vidal.

In 2005, then-Congresswoman Wilson toured the 102,000-acre Valle Vidal (part of which is in Taos County) with Heinrich, who was at that time an Albuquerque city councilor. A Texas-based company was exploring the possibility of drilling in the area and constituents were urging Wilson to add protections to block development.

At the time, Heinrich was adamant that the area needed special protection. Wilson had not yet taken a firm stance on the Valle Vidal. She eventually co-sponsored a House bill to protect the area.

Rather then re-designate more public lands, Wilson told The Taos News that the best way to boost tourism in Taos is to improve the economy in general. “The most important thing for all of America today is to get back to strong economic growth and job creation,” she said. “If people are making more, if people can get back to work, they’ll get back to taking a vacation, going skiing over Christmas, coming in and buying art.”

To do that, Wilson leans on her platform of simplifying the tax code and putting a “moratorium on job-killing regulations,” such as the federal cap-and-trade bill. The bill is meant to limit greenhouse gases, but Wilson claims it could eliminate 11,000 New Mexico jobs. That figure comes from a 2009 study paid for by conservative think tank The American Council for Capital Formation and the National Association of Manufacturing.

Energy

Heinrich bills himself as the forward-thinking candidate who embraces renewable resources. His campaign website labels him as “a champion for his state’s burgeoning clean energy economy,” and he thinks the industry has a future in the state.

“The technology is real. The costs are coming down. We just need to make sure we have leadership that’s going to fight for it,” Heinrich said, noting that the obstacles to a green energy future are primarily political.

Wilson, meanwhile, has been touting an “all of the above” strategy that relies on traditional energy sources like oil and coal while supporting the development
of renewable. “I think we need an energy strategy that includes all of those things. We’re not going to be able to explore our way out of an energy shortage. And we’re not going to be able to conserve our way out of it either,” Wilson said.

The oil and gas industry has given about $235,000 to Wilson’s Senate campaign. In the past, she has voted to keep subsidies for oil and gas exploration.

Wilson has called Heinrich’s policies a “green dream” that will raise energy rates while destroying jobs in the state. Heinrich calls that characterization “ridiculous.” “There are thousands of New Mexicans who are working in the renewable and green jobs fields today,” Heinrich said. “That’s our future. We should be investing in that.”

Taos County doesn’t have much in the way of oil, gas or coal. But Kit Carson Electric Cooperative has aggressively worked to tie solar energy into its grid, and the feasibility of that effort is directly tied to tax incentives for renewable energy.

Both Heinrich and Wilson say they will continue to support those tax incentives.

Tribal issues

When asked about American Indian issues, both Wilson and Heinrich were eager to point to their record of supporting tribes in New Mexico.

Wilson described her work helping to establish the Ojito Wilderness with Zia Pueblo, (Wilson is credited with pushing the bill out of committee, and Heinrich supported the effort as director of the Coalition for New Mexico’s Wilderness.) She also said she helped settle the Sandia Land Claim in 2003.

Wilson said jobs were obviously important to American Indians in New Mexico, and tribal sovereignty is a big issue.

Heinrich touted a law he recently spearheaded to make it easier for Natives to buy a home on tribal land. He also mentioned his seat on the House Natural Resources Committee, which dealt with tribal water claims, including the Taos Pueblo Indian Water Rights Settlement Act. Before it passed, Heinrich said on the floor of the House that the legislation “will bring much needed certainty to the pueblos of Northern New Mexico by restoring their right to clean, reliable water.”

This campaign season, Heinrich has attracted endorsements from tribes and Native groups statewide, including the Cochiti, Jemez, Zia, Ohkay Owingeh, Isleta and Laguna pueblos. Campaign finance reports show that Taos Pueblo donated $1,500 to Heinrich’s campaign last year.

Wilson’s energy platform was recently endorsed by the Navajo Nation Council. In a letter, Johnny Naize, the speaker of the Navajo Nation Council, commended Wilson’s “support of the jobs and economic revenues that the coal industry represents to our region.”

Naize said recent Environmental Protection Agency rulings could cut the tribe’s revenues by 50 percent and threatened tribal sovereignty.
Senators seek to protect two NM sites

Albuquerque Journal
10/27/2012

A large swath of northern New Mexico would become a national monument based around the Rio Grande Gorge under a new proposal by the state’s two U.S. senators.

Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall also are asking President Barack Obama to designate the Organ Mountains in the south part of the state as a national monument. The Democratic senators want a much bigger Organ Mountains monument than one proposed by Republican U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce.

The senators, who are sponsors of pending legislation that would elevate the Rio Grande Gorge and Organ Mountain sites to national conservation and wilderness areas, wrote a letter to Obama asking him to use his authority to establish the sites as national monuments instead because a congressional logjam has made it difficult to pass their bill.

“The New Mexicans on every level, from grass-roots campaigns to mayors and county commissioners, have expressed their support for the protection of these special places,” Udall and Bingaman’s letter to the president stated.

In absence of the passage of any legislation, the senators asked the president to work with local communities to explore how the national monument designation would “protect the archeological and cultural resources in these two regions.”

National monument status would allow the lands and their wildlife habitat to be protected while preserving existing uses such as hunting, fishing and grazing, the senators said in a news release.

Other national monuments in New Mexico include White Sands, Bandelier, Gila Cliff Dwellings and Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks.

Presidents have authority to designate national monuments under the federal Antiquities Act.

Last year, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee supported legislation sponsored by Udall and Bingaman called the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act.

That bill would protect about 236,000 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Taos and Rio Arriba counties, including much of the scenic Rio Grande Gorge as well Ute Mountain near the Colorado border north of Taos, by designating a combination of conservation and wilderness areas. But the bill has stalled since the committee action.
The senators are also the sponsors of a bill which seeks to create wilderness and conservation areas in Doña Ana County to protect the Organ Mountains and the volcanic cinder cones of the Potrillo Mountains, among other public lands in the county. There would be 241,000 acres of wilderness and 100,000 acres of national conservation area.

Republican Pearce is supporting a less restrictive national monument bill for the Organ Mountains, which are part of his southern New Mexico congressional district.

Pearce’s monument bill would protect about 58,500 acres of the Organ Mountains from development, only about a quarter of the acreage proposed for conservation or wilderness designations by the Democratic senators.

Pearce has said his bill is a good compromise between conservationists and ranchers who are sometimes on opposite sides of the issue.

“We’re basically trying to protect what we all think of as the Organs from development, but still allow broader access,” Pearce said.

— This article appeared on page C1 of the Albuquerque Journal
New Mexico Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall are asking President Obama to designate the Rio Grande Gorge near Taos and the Organ Mountains in southern New Mexico as national monuments.

The senators, who are sponsors of legislation that would elevate the sites to national conservation and wilderness areas, wrote a letter to Obama asking him to use his authority to establish the sites as National Monuments because a congressional logjam has made it difficult to pass their bill.

They say National Monument status would protect the lands and their wildlife habitat while preserving existing uses such as hunting, fishing, and grazing. Other National Monuments in the state include Carlsbad Caverns, White Sands, Bandelier, Chaco Canyon, Gila Cliff Dwellings, and Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks.
NM Senators ask Obama for monument designations

Posted at: 10/26/2012
KOB 4- Albuquerque/The Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) - New Mexico Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall are asking President Obama to designate the Rio Grande Gorge near Taos and the Organ Mountains in southern New Mexico as national monuments.

The senators, who are sponsors of legislation that would elevate the sites to national conservation and wilderness areas, wrote a letter to Obama asking him to use his authority to establish the sites as National Monuments because a congressional logjam has made it difficult to pass their bill.

They say National Monument status would protect the lands and their wildlife habitat while preserving existing uses such as hunting, fishing, and grazing.

Other National Monuments in the state include Carlsbad Caverns, White Sands, Bandelier, Chaco Canyon, Gila Cliff Dwellings, and Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks.

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I want to applaud President Obama for taking steps to protect our unique Southwest heritage. The designation of Chimney Rock National Monument in Colorado was great recognition that some places are so important to our shared history that they deserve to be protected for all time.

Chimney Rock is of great importance to Native Americans tribes. With its twin sandstone pillars and massive Chaco-style masonry walls, the monument protects a landscape important to the continuation of traditional cultural practices of the modern Puebloan Indians.

This designation shows us how important it is to protect what’s important to us.

The Río Grande del Norte area has been home to human inhabitants for more than 11,000 years. This area has a rich history which is also worthy of protection.

As with our Taos Pueblo people and Pueblo Native Americans that preceded them, Hispano culture and presence in New Mexico has always been closely connected to Río Grande del Norte’s dramatic landscape. There has been an effort to protect Río Grande del Norte which is supported by local business owners, sportsmen, ranchers, land grant leaders, elected officials and others.

I hope that as people see the benefit of protecting Chimney Rock that we will soon see a renewed effort to preserve our natural and cultural heritage by protecting Río Grande del Norte.

Erminio Martínez is a resident from El Salto.
Imagine a deep canyon of 200 feet dropping down to the Rio Grande, a river that is the lifeblood of New Mexico. Imagine this stretch of wild and scenic waters, serving as a crucial flyway for migrating birds such as ospreys, hummingbirds and herons. Above the gorge eagles and falcons nest in the cliffs, and stretches of sagebrush give way to snow-capped mountains.

This beautiful landscape is iconic in New Mexico - almost every Northern New Mexican has visited the Gorge to gasp in its immensity (and people across the nation saw it as part of an epic fight scene in the Terminator 2 movie). It is also beyond beauty – this land is the upper atershed for a desert state. We drink from our faucets in the big metropolises downstream and have El Rio Grande del Norte to thank.

Our neighbors in southern Colorado, not too far from the Rio Grande del Norte, received exciting news on Sept. 21. President Barack Obama used his executive power under the Antiquities Act to designate our newest National Monument: Chimney Rock.

Located in the San Juan National Forest in southwestern Colorado, the area is of great spiritual importance to Pueblos and other tribes in the Southwest.

“We commend President Obama for using his authority to protect this important piece of America. National monument designation honors and benefits this important cultural site, the local economy and regional tribes. Protecting public lands is good for communities, good for business and good for nature,” said Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune.

Permanent protection of El Rio Grande del Norte is no exception — whether through legislation or National Monument status, protection would provide an economic boost for Taos and surrounding areas, and protect this special place from encroaching development. Will we be next?

To sign on to support the designation of the Rio Grande del Norte, please visit: action.sierraclub.org/
Last Friday, President Obama acted to protect Chimney Rock as a national monument. I felt honored to attend the event as a regional resident and as the New Mexico Chamber of Commerce representative.

Chimney Rock is an ancient and sacred site of the Chacoan Pueblos and was the site where ancient people observed the sky and the rare Lunar Standstill. The Chacoan Pueblo peoples originally extended from the Four Corners into central New Mexico between A.D. 900 and 1150.

The Chacoan Pueblo peoples split into the 19 tribes today that are governed by the All Indian Pueblo Council. This cultural and spiritual center is absolutely deserving of national recognition.

Chimney Rock isn’t the only place in our region that deserves national recognition, and the benefits that would follow. Here in Northern New Mexico many business people and families are supporting a proposal to permanently protect the Río Grande del Norte. The time has come for President Obama and our members of Congress to pull together and act on their commitment to protect the Río Grande del Norte for all time.

The Río Grande del Norte — and the opportunities it provides for hunting, fishing, rafting, ballooning, climbing, hiking, camping, and other forms of recreation — is already a major economic engine for the Taos region.

This area is important to local businesses and our personal economies in other ways, such as by providing clean drinking and irrigation water, farm land, fish and game to feed our families, and a place to graze livestock, gather firewood and piñon pine nuts.

Once this beloved landscape has a permanent protection, the Río Grande del Norte will be available as a resource in perpetuity to assist us all to create new jobs and contribute to the long-term sustainability of our community, economy, and way of life.

For those of you who might not know, the Río Grande del Norte is an enchanting 236,000 acres west of Taos steeped in New Mexico history and culture. New Mexico’s Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and Rep. Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich have all introduced legislation to protect it as a National Conservation Area. But these efforts have stalled in a deficient Congress.
All over the West, you can find examples of rural communities that have lost open space, clean water and access to prized hunting and fishing areas and river ways because of reckless development. By permanently protecting the Río Grande del Norte area, we will protect the multiple rafting and balloon companies that depend on the beauty of the river.

We would ensure that access to Ute Mountain, local hunting and firewood gathering areas and breathtaking public lands can continue unabated. Protecting these lands is critical to the quality of life that has inspired so many families, artists and business owners to live here and steward this land.

University of New Mexico economist Dr. Robert Berrens said in a recent report, “The critical natural capital inherent in protecting public lands generates a wide variety of benefits essential to economic development and sustainable communities across New Mexico.”

The report, by Headwaters Economics, showed that communities with a high percentage of protected public lands tended to fair much better economically than communities with lower percentages of protected public lands. Given that most of the businesses in the Taos region are small and dependent on the beauty of our natural resources, protecting the Río Grande del Norte is imperative.

If you would like to see the Taos folks that support the Río Grande del Norte project and shared their stories see the beautiful coffee table book, The Río Grande del Norte — One Hundred New Mexican Speak for a Legacy. You can find the book at [www.riograndedelnorte.org/book/](http://www.riograndedelnorte.org/book/).

Protecting the Río Grande del Norte is an investment in our community. I urge President Obama to act swiftly to ensure permanent protection of this area—for the future of our community, economy, and our way of life for all our children.

Erin Sanborn is director of the Taos Green Chamber of Commerce and Collaborative Green, and a business owner.
President Obama took a step toward protecting the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the Southwest by designating Chimney Rock in Colorado a national monument. He should maintain that momentum to protect wonderful places in New Mexico as well.

El Río Grande del Norte is home to some spectacular wildlife. Bald eagles, falcons, and hawks cover the sky in the summer, migratory birds, such as herons, merlins, and sandhill cranes stop here on the way to the Bosque del Apache, and pronghorn antelope and elk roam the land.

Ute Mountain, standing prominent on the horizon, is covered in piñón, ponderosa, aspens, and white pines. In addition, New Mexicans hunt, fish, hike and swim in the area.

We are fortunate to live in the Land of Enchantment. I encourage President Obama to protect special places in New Mexico, like El Río Grande del Norte, so future generations will be able to enjoy them as we do.

Sanders Moore
Director, Environment New Mexico
Water is life: Protect Rio Grande del Norte

Los Alamos Monitor
9/25/2012
Op-ed by Francisco Guevara

There is a well-known saying in the southwest: “Agua es vida,” or “water is life.” This isn’t just a reference to our limited supplies, but also to the cultural, spiritual and economic significance of water to our way of life.

As the owner of a rafting company in Northern New Mexico, water is indeed my life. I take tourists and residents whitewater rafting, camping and fishing while exposing them to the culture, natural beauty and majesty that makes Northern Mexico so special. That’s why I support efforts underway to protect the Rio Grande Gorge as part of a potential Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area. But it is also why I was pleased to hear President Obama had designated a new national monument in Colorado recently.

Chimney Rock west of Pagosa Springs isn’t a vital water resource. Instead, its ancient pueblos are held sacred by Native Americans. I’m hoping that if the President is willing to act to recognize and protect the important cultural significance of Chimney Rock, he’ll also act to protect the Rio Grande del Norte, which is sacred to us.

Here in Northern New Mexico, families have irrigated from acequias for hundreds of years. We grow chiles, corn and apples.

We rely on water from the Rio Grande to feed our families, but also to feed our souls. Ask any local potter, silversmith, writer or painter.

Ask a clergy or tribal member.

Ask any rafter, hunter or angler.

The answer is the same: “Agua es vida.”

In addition to supporting our cultural heritage, the Rio Grande is also the lifeline for many small businesses like mine in rural communities throughout New Mexico.

Recreation-based businesses rely on the Rio Grande to support rafting, fishing and hunting trips. Indirectly these activities also support restaurants, lodging, outfitters and guides in addition to contributing to the local tax base. According to the data from the Outdoor Industry Association, more than 100,000 New Mexicans participate in hunting every year, nearly 200,000 in fishing, more than 66,000 in rafting and a whooping 469,000 in wildlife viewing.

That is why there is such a diversity of
support for permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte. Supporters include business owners, ranchers, sportsmen, veterans, recreationists, elected officials, Native Americans, land grant leaders, and other conservationists.

Ask anyone that had ever been to the Rio Grande gorge, young or old, and they can tell you that this stretch of river and the surrounding area is some of the wildest and most spectacular in the whole state.

It is vital that we work together to preserve it, and we need President Obama’s help. Legislation to protect the area has been stalled in the U.S. Congress. While our congressional delegation is valiantly working hard to overcome gridlock in Washington, I worry that this opportunity to protect the Rio Grande del Norte, and benefit our state and nation is so many ways, will be lost.

Protecting our water supplies and way of life cannot be put on hold while the U.S. House of Representatives takes yet another run at dismantling our health care or attacking clean energy.

Instead, it is the Rio Grande del Norte that needs our attention, and President Obama’s leadership; nothing less than our culture, economy, and way of life depend on it.

Francisco Guevara is a multigenerational, native northern New Mexican. He has run his rafting business, Los Rios River Runners for more than 40 years.
Rio Grande del Norte informs state character

Santa Fe New Mexican  
9/22/2012  
Joe Maestas

Just last week, President Barack Obama took action and used the Antiquities Act to declare Chimney Rock in neighboring Colorado as a national monument. This move was a strong recognition that some places are so important to our shared culture and heritage that they deserve to be protected for all time.

We all try to teach our children about their heritage. We show them old photos, tell them family stories, teach them our values, and take them to places both inspirational and educational. By helping our children appreciate where they came from, we give them a strong sense of identity and a cultural tie to their community.

Here in Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, our heritage includes the open lands where generations have grazed cattle, hunted elk and hooked rainbow trout. It also includes the clean waters of the Rio Grande, Chama, Conejos and San Juan rivers that have sustained our farms and families and allowed us to live and grow here for generations building a uniquely New Mexican story.

On the New Mexico side of the Colorado border, we appreciate the president’s designation of Chimney Rock as a national monument. Now, we hope President Obama and our members of Congress can pull together and finish the job of permanently protecting the Rio Grande del Norte region in Northern New Mexico just west of Taos.

The Rio Grande del Norte is bounded on the north by the New Mexico-Colorado border, on the east by the Rio Grande Gorge, on the south by a jutting line running several miles north of U.S. 64, and on the west by U.S. 285. Its northwest portion crosses over U.S. 285, encompassing the Rio San Antonio Gorge Wilderness Study Area. It also includes the Rio Grande Gorge south to the Taos Junction Bridge.

In recent years, New Mexico’s Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and Reps. Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich have introduced legislation to protect 236,000
acres of federal public lands in the Rio Grande del Norte as a National Conservation Area. However, efforts to move this legislation through Congress have not yet been successful.

Generations of New Mexicans have hunted, fished, grazed and tramped through the Rio Grande del Norte region. We have gone there to gather firewood and piñon nuts and seek out its beauty to sustain our souls. It is one of the most enchanting parts of our Land of Enchantment.

These strong feelings for the Rio Grande del Norte are shared by people across Northern New Mexico, and we have found common ground in working to protect this area. President Obama would be joining a robust coalition of supporters who need his help: business and community leaders, ranchers, sportsmen, land grant heirs, local elected officials, our congressional delegation and others who are asking for permanent protection of the Rio Grande del Norte.

In fact, in the words of Lilia Diaz of Santa Fe, who was featured in a recently published book about New Mexicans speaking out for protection of the Rio Grande del Norte (see www.RioGrandedelNorte.org/book), “this ancient area has enriched the minds, bodies, hearts and souls of New Mexicans for generations. Protecting this land will mean the enhancement of many more lives to come.”

The Rio Grande del Norte proves that our heritage need not be an artifact in a museum or a footnote in a history book to be worthy of our admiration and protection. Our community — like my family — values this place as our legacy to the next generation. These lands have been here for thousands of years. We call on President Obama to help ensure they remain protected for a thousand more for our spiritual, cultural, economic and community well-being.

Joseph M. Maestas was mayor of Española from 2006-2010. He currently resides in Santa Fe.
Dear President Obama:

Thank you for using your authority under the Antiquities Act to establish Fort Monroe and Fort Ord as America’s newest national monuments. As members of the House Sustainable Energy and Environment Coalition (SEEC), we are writing to request that you use this authority to protect more of America’s greatest, most threatened places. Last November, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar released a report highlighting 18 legislative opportunities to designate public lands as wilderness or National Conservation Areas. The report featured locally-supported proposals from Democrats and Republicans, including areas in some of our members’ districts:

- Rio Grande del Norte in New Mexico (Rep. Ben Ray Lujan)
- Castle Peak and Bull Gulch in Colorado (Rep. Jared Polis)
- Gold Butte and Pine Forest Range in Nevada (Rep. Shelley Berkley)
- Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary (Rep. Lynn Woolsey)
- Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (Rep. Lynn Woolsey)

Countless other areas in many of our districts in both the East and West mirror this bipartisan, local support and deserve protection. Thank you for challenging Congress to act on these noncontroversial proposals right away. Unfortunately, the Republican majority in the House has failed to pass a single one of these measures, even those introduced by Republicans and instead has focused on rolling back environmental protections for our nation’s land, water, and wildlife.

In light of the House’s failure to report legislation protecting federal public lands, we encourage you to use the Antiquities Act and protect our country’s most cherished public lands for future generations. The report issued by Secretary Salazar provides a good starting point for lands to consider. Thank you for your steadfast efforts to protect the environment in the face of an unprecedented assault by the House majority and for your consideration of our request to protect public lands through administrative action.
Editor’s Note: This letter was written and signed by Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., and other members of the House Sustainable Energy and Environmental Coalition (SEEC), to President Barack Obama urging him to use The Antiquities Act to name certain areas either national monuments, wilderness or National Conservation Areas.
Building a wild legacy

Lake Havasu News-Herald
Op-ed
8/7/2012
By Mike Matz

Doing business in Washington has never been easy — and public legacies often require bipartisan agreement. But there has been a strong tradition of our nation’s leaders, at the highest levels, putting other differences aside to preserve America’s natural heritage.

A legacy is a gift, one we give to our children or to the public, for use and enjoyment now or in the future. Parents bequeath money or property to their heirs to provide a solid foundation for their lives. Similarly, elected officials often want to leave something for their constituents: sometimes passing a bill to fund construction of a building, highway, or dam. But legislative bequests can also take the form of permanently protected parts of our nation’s last remaining wild places.

By recent count, 26 members of the House of Representatives and 10 in the Senate are retiring in December at the end of the 112th Congress. And for legislators looking to round out their congressional careers by imparting a lasting legacy, I have a suggestion.

Two dozen bills to designate wilderness areas — the highest level of permanent legal protection available for U.S. public lands — are moving forward in Congress. Many of these proposals enjoy strong support by a diverse array of constituents who are keen to see these conservation measures enacted for the many benefits they could bring to their local communities, from the preservation of clean water supplies to a potential influx of new tourism dollars. Retiring members could play a crucial role in helping pass these measures.

For example, Teddy Roosevelt is renowned for his conservation efforts, utilizing an array of legal tools to leave a wealth of areas that Americans enjoy today. Less commonly known, however, is that President Ronald Reagan worked with congressional leaders in both parties, including Speaker “Tip” O’Neill, D-Mass., and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, R-Kan., to approve
legislation that permanently protected more than 10 million acres of pristine land.

Reagan signed 43 measures covering areas in 27 states — more bills than any president since the Wilderness Act became law in 1964. California’s Magic Mountain Wilderness, Spice Run Wilderness in West Virginia, and Colorado’s Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness, to name just a few, are enduring monuments of the willingness of lawmakers and presidents to work across party lines to leave a legacy from which Americans can benefit.

I’m optimistic that Congress will act before the end of the year on a package of public land measures, including several sponsored by members giving up their seats.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., at the end of a distinguished 30-year career, has offered proposals to establish a Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, protect the Organ and Robledo mountains and nearby wilderness, and designate Columbine Hondo in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

In the House, Rep. David Dreier, R-Calif., is leading the charge to pass wilderness legislation for parts of the Angeles and San Bernardino national forests as he winds down his 32 years in Congress. Rep. Dreier is chairman of the Rules Committee, which determines which legislation goes to the floor for consideration.

Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Calif., in his 13th and final term, has authored a bill to protect wilderness in the Los Padres National Forest.

And Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Wash., who is retiring after 36 years in the House, recently introduced a measure to safeguard wild land and rivers on his state’s Olympic Peninsula.

By some counts, more than 160 memorials are in our nation’s capital. Yet some of the largest, and perhaps most-striking, testaments to the enduring accomplishments of U.S. political leaders can be found far outside Washington. And as the 112th Congress winds to a close, I hope outgoing members will take this unique opportunity to add their legacy to the collection of truly remarkable places preserved over the past 48 years as wilderness areas across America.

Mike Matz directs the Pew Environment Group’s Campaign for America’s Wilderness. Readers may write to him at: Pew Environment Group, 901 E Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20004; email: mmatz@pewtrusts.org.
Conservation legislation likely to stall during general election

The New Mexican
July 18, 2012
Staci Matlock

Dozens of conservation bills in Congress are likely stalled until after the November election, including two measures that would add new protections to thousands of acres in Northern New Mexico.

Congress will recess for most of August. When senators and representatives return, they’ll be caught up in election fervor, and bills already stuck in committees are unlikely to move, according to congressional staffers.

Three bills involving New Mexico lands — the Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Act, the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act and the Valles Caldera National Preserve Management Act — are pending in the U.S. Senate. The Rio Grande National Preserve Management Act has made it out of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to the Senate floor. The committee is chaired by Sen. Jeff Bingaman, who supports all three and hopes to see them through before he retires at the end of the year.

“Not a whole lot will happen before the election,” predicted Bingaman aide Maria Najera. “There’s a move to put a package of bills together including those [an omnibus bill] that would hopefully pass in the lame-duck session.”

The Rio Grande del Norte and Columbine-Hondo bills have broad support among Taos County residents and some ranchers, sportsmen and environmentalists.

The Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Act would protect almost 236,000 acres straddling the Rio Grande Gorge from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to Ute Mountain and from the New Mexico-Colorado border to the Taos Junction Bridge. Most of the land is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The bill would protect the land from oil and gas drilling and other mineral development. It would protect “traditional” uses of the land, such as livestock grazing, hunting and cutting wood for fuel.

The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act would permanently protect 46,000 acres of Carson National Forest in the Sangre de Cristo high country. The land has been a wilderness study area since 1980 and encompasses the headwaters of the Rio Hondo and Red River.

Erminio Martinez, an Arroyo Seco rancher with a permit to graze cattle in the Columbine-Hondo area, supports the act. “I graze on both wilderness and nonwilderness land in the national forest on three
“allotments,” he said. “I have a vested interest.”

As with the Rio Grande del Norte, grazing, hunting and other traditional activities would be protected under the wilderness act. But new development, such as roads and mining development, would be prohibited. Martinez is also a member of the Taos Land Trust and the Northern New Mexico Livestock Association. He advocates for preserving private land through conservation easements and protecting public land.

Martinez said it has taken some convincing of older ranchers in the area that wilderness designation and conservation easements are the way to protect their traditions. “Older members feel like government would have more of a hand in what could take place. But the act is written to protect grazing,” he said. “I think the more the grazing permittees learn the advantages of [the protection], the more they’ll support it.”

Concerns over oil and gas drilling stem from current well development in northern Rio Arriba County, just across the border from Taos County, Martinez said.

Another bill involving New Mexico public lands would turn over management of the 88,900-acre Valles Caldera National Preserve to the National Park Service. The preserve in the Jemez Mountains was a ranch purchased by Congress in 2000 and turned into a public land experiment. It was managed by a presidentially appointed board guided by a set of mandates: protect the resources, increase access for the public, use it as a working ranch and make it financially self-sufficient by 2015.

Many advocates for the preserve decided the experiment had failed halfway to the finish line. Some, such as Tom Ribe of Caldera Action, began advocating for the National Park Service to take over management. New Mexico’s senators, Tom Udall and Bingaman, support turning over management of the preserve. Max Trujillo, a Las Vegas, N.M., outdoorsman and Northern New Mexico representative with the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, said it isn’t surprising that none of the conservation bills has moved much. He’s not too worried about how the November election might affect the bills. “It can’t get any worse than it is right now,” he said. “Congress is gridlocked and can’t pass bills that are more important to the nation than [these] because they don’t see eye to eye.”
My Turn: Spending National Trails Day on land that should be protected

Terry Chastain
June 21, 2012

I celebrated National Trails Day, June 2, by visiting one of my favorite places in Northern New Mexico: Río Grande del Norte. The area is steeped in cultural and natural history, and this area provided a fitting place for a day to celebrate New Mexico’s great outdoors.

Ute Mountain — perhaps one of the most well-known places — is an essential part of the traditional values of the New Mexican people. The mountain and the Río Grande del Norte area, which it rises over, serve as an escape from everyday life in the modern world.

Several persons accompanied me on this hike up the mountain. Among them was a local woman who hiked to the top of Ute Mountain years ago, and returned to “honor the mountain” by visiting again. To her it was a spiritual journey and her love for the mountain was the motivation to make the difficult climb. Her passion for the beauty and wildness of the area was apparent, and to her it is clear we are connected with these wild places on a deep level, and honoring and respecting them is important for our own well being as well.

The Río Grande del Norte area is the protectant of New Mexico’s water. Deep within in the land lies the beginning, or headwaters, of many rivers that sustain the downstream communities. The Río Grande River is responsible for a lot of the water in New Mexico, and the abundance of water could not be possible without protection.

The Río Grande del Norte takes us back to when the Earth was pristine and its peoples lived in harmony with the land. El Río Grande del Norte is a time capsule of our nation’s rich history. It is home to many vestiges of American Indian history, including ancient legends, petroglyphs and ruins.

If its rich cultural past is not enough to lure you in, it is also teeming with wildlife. It is a habitat for antelope, big horn sheep, elk, sandhill cranes, golden eagles, deer, peregrine falcons, and other native animals. It is also a meeting place for thousands of birds making their way across the country by way of the Río Grande Flyway; a flyway where one can find three different species of hummingbird (if you can spot them fast enough!). Needless to say, the possibilities for bird watching, photography and hunting are limitless.

Río Grande del Norte is a rift valley alive with plains of wildflowers, abundant wildlife and wild adventures. It is a wonderful place for those not only seeking solace, but fun, recreation and education. There are any number of great outdoor activities to choose from, ranging from swimming, hiking, rafting, horseback riding,
bird watching, fishing, and big game hunting — just to name a few.

Simply put, it is a nature lover’s paradise; a place to remember where we came from, who we are, and what great debt we owe to our planet.

Fortuitously, there is a bill in Congress that could protect Río Grande del Norte for future generations. The Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act (S 667 and HR 1241) — introduced in the Senate by Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and co-sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM), and in the House by Rep. Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) with Rep. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) as a co-sponsor — would safeguard more than 21,000 acres of wilderness within a larger national conservation area of 235,980 acres.

Passing this bill is crucial for conservation efforts in New Mexico and the surrounding states that also benefit from this untouched expanse. It would keep these lands wild and open to the public for their outdoor choice of recreation.

It is truly precious, but if we fail to protect it, it could be forever ruined. Yet, there are several bills in Congress that could giveaway or destroy this incredible area. Somehow, Río Grande del Norte must be permanently protected.

As I stood on Ute Mountain, I could not think there was a better way to spend National Trails Day than in Río Grande del Norte. I hope that when I return next year, it will be permanently protected.

Terry Chastain is a semi-retired accountant living in Taos County who enjoys spending time in nature and is passionate about preserving our wild places.
Taos wilderness group brings attention to Ute Mountain

Matthew van Buren
June 14, 2012

To bring attention to a proposed Northern New Mexico wilderness area, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance arranged a hike up Ute Mountain, June 2.

Ute Mountain, a volcanic formation that rises nearly 2,500 feet from the surrounding plateau to just under 10,100 feet, sits just south of the Colorado border and is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Congress is considering a bill that would create the 13,420-acre “Cerro del Yuta Wilderness” as part of the 236,000-acre Río Grande del Norte Conservation Area. If the bill is passed, the 8,000-acre “Río San Antonio Wilderness” would also be created around San Antonio Mountain.

BLM park ranger Daniel Rael said Ute Mountain is currently roadless, and game trails and trenches formed by forestry skidders when the mountain was being logged in the early- to mid-20th century form the principal hiking paths. He said, were the area designated as wilderness, management would not change significantly. It would, however, protect the area from future development.

Outfitter, Mora County commissioner and northern director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance John Olivas said he has been taking groups up Ute Mountain annually for each of the last three years. He said the trips are taken in an effort to highlight the Río Grande del Norte area in general and the proposed Cerro del Yuta Wilderness in particular.

“We’re working on showcasing the area,” he said. “Ute Mountain was designated specifically because of its roadless characteristics. There’s no development. There are no roads.”

Rael, who is studying geology at New Mexico State University, said Ute Mountain was formed about 2.1 million years ago, making it the youngest of the volcanoes on the Taos Plateau. It sits within the San Luís Basin and Río Grande Rift. As the mountain gains in elevation, prairie grassland becomes primarily Ponderosa pine forest.

Rael said the BLM acquired the property from a local rancher (though a section of it
remains privately owned) and uses it only for wildlife purposes.

“Pronghorn, deer and elk thrive in the area,” he said.

Rael said elk commonly migrate through the Ute Mountain area, as they often come in from Colorado and go through the Valle Vidal area before heading west to Ute Mountain, the Wild and Scenic Rivers area and San Antonio Mountain.

“Hunting is, well, more popular than hiking,” he said of recreational use of the area.

Olivas said over the last three years of trips up Ute Mountain, he hasn’t encountered other groups. However, a visitor log at the top of the mountain shows hikers are active on Ute.

“We don’t see a lot of active groups,” he said. “Actually, I don’t think we’ve seen any.”

The group Olivas took up Ute Mountain June 2 did not reach the top, as late-morning thunderstorms moved in while the hikers were still a few hundred feet away from the summit.

Legislation that would create the National Conservation Area, including the two wilderness areas, was introduced by Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, and U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, at the end of March 2011. According to information from the Library of Congress, the bill has been placed on the Senate legislative calendar, and the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands held a hearing regarding the matter March 29.

Olivas said Congress may approve the legislation by the end of this year, as Bingaman will be retiring at the end of 2012.

“That’s definitely the hope,” he said.

Bingaman has also introduced legislation to give full wilderness protection to the 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo area in Taos County.

Olivas provided The Taos News with polling data that shows wide support for protection of the Río Grande del Norte area in Taos and Río Arriba counties, based on 400 telephone interviews conducted in April.

According to the polling report, 83 percent of Taos County residents support the idea, and 12 percent oppose it. In Rio Arriba County, 69 percent favor protecting the Río Grande del Norte area, while 26 percent oppose it. Voters in both counties who hunt several times a year favor the proposed Conservation Area 68 percent to 30 percent, and those who fish several times a year favor it 77 percent to 20 percent.

“By a 70 percent to 22 percent margin, likely voters in Taos and Río Arriba think this would be good for the local economy rather than bad,” the report states.

For more information about the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, visit nmwild.org.
The pink and white cherry blossoms I expected to see last month in our nation's capital had bloomed early and were gone, but my recent trip to Washington was fruitful. Last month, I had the privilege of testifying before a House committee in support of an issue I feel strongly about -- protecting the spectacular Rio Grande del Norte area in Northern New Mexico.

My family goes back many generations here, living and working in this unique and beautiful landscape. Many of us consider the area, including the stunning Rio Grande Gorge, which at some places is a half mile wide across and dropping to the Rio Grande 800 feet below, to be truly sacred land.

My grandfather, J. P. Rael, and his brothers started a cattle business and general store in Questa in 1930. When I was growing up, there was no running water. We walked to the store, grew our own food and put up hay for our cattle. We survived because of the land and water that nature had so generously provided us. As my grandfather said, "Without land you have nothing; without water there is no life."

As an elected official, I understand the difficult choices one must make when trying to balance competing interests. We need to meet the needs of a growing community, while ensuring that some of what attracts both visitors and those who will settle here stays just as it is. That is what I shared with members of Congress who may soon be considering legislation introduced by Rep. Ben Ray Luján and Sen. Jeff Bingaman to safeguard these special lands for our children and grandchildren.

Their bill, the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, will protect some 235,000 acres north of Taos as a conservation area, including more than 21,000 acres of new wilderness. This is a high mesa of sagebrush and grasslands interspersed with volcanic cinder cones covered with piñon-juniper woodlands. Here, in the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Gorge, are vital elk wintering grounds, key habitat for bighorn sheep, antelope and deer, and a world-renowned migratory corridor for birds of prey such as peregrine falcons, bald eagles and golden eagles.

Few would disagree that the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area is a landscape of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural and recreational value. Here, we who live nearby and a growing number of visitors can enjoy hunting, fishing, bird watching, photography, hiking, camping, river rafting, mountain climbing, piñon picking or just the amazing natural scenery. All of this is vital support for our local economy. Hunting and fishing alone in the Rio Grande area
contribute tens of millions of dollars to New Mexico's economy annually.

Communities such as Questa, Hondo, Cerro, Pilar and Antonito have been bound economically and spiritually to this wild landscape for many generations. One of the great virtues of this legislation is that it takes a comprehensive approach to the conservation of this land, with full recognition that there is a long human history to this region and that our small communities continue to be an essential element of the landscape. The bill will protect both the natural resources and the way of life of this unique area, both of which are intrinsically linked in our community.

I commend Rep. Luján and Sen. Bingaman for ensuring that their legislation preserves grazing within the National Conservation Area, and specifically protects our right to hunt, fish and collect piñon nuts and firewood. It directs the Bureau of Land Management to preserve the cultural, natural and scenic resources in the area. The measure will help ensure that these ancestral lands will remain as they are for those who will come after us.

There is overwhelming local support for this measure. Because of the collaborative way our congressional delegation has crafted this measure, many groups that haven't always seen eye to eye on conservation issues have come together to support protecting this special landscape. Community involvement was extensive and the considerations taken in the bill's language to accommodate the needs of traditional communities were significant.

That is why the overwhelming majority of Northern New Mexicans, including the Taos County Chamber of Commerce, the Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Taos County Commission, the Latino Sustainability Institute and dozens and dozens of area businesses want to see this bill become law. Forever protecting the Rio Grande del Norte area would be a priceless gift for those who will come after us. The time has come.

Esther Garcia is the mayor of Questa.
Rio Grande del Norte Area a Natural, Cultural Treasure

By Erminio Martinez, Taos
Sun, Apr 29, 2012

I was born and raised in Taos County and come from a ranching family that has lived off the land for eight generations. Today, as a registered grazing permittee, I continue to run cattle on several allotments throughout the Carson National Forest. Growing up in the ranching business allowed me the good fortune of spending most of my life in the great outdoors. Like my father and grandfather, I quickly learned to love the beauty of the wide-open landscapes and to understand the importance of sound conservation of the abundant natural resources on which so many New Mexicans depend for their livelihoods.

After my military service, I attended New Mexico Highlands University and then the National Judicial College. I served for 20 years as a magistrate judge in Taos County, and have worked for the Taos tribal government and the Pojoaque tribal government during my career. I continue to be active in conservation, including through my service with local land trusts.

To me, the wide open landscape of the Rio Grande del Norte area is a treasure that we must do all we can to protect. It is not only a natural treasure, but also a treasury of cultural resources and associations, evoking the Native American, Spanish, and American history that contribute to the diverse values of this area. Even though this region may seem relatively remote, it lies in the path of pressures for change that could slowly but surely affect the resources that makes this landscape so special.

Conservation is about exercising protection of our lands today with the foresight that our children and their children will inherit this precious landscape.

I believe that what Teddy Roosevelt said about the Grand Canyon should be our guidance for the Rio Grande del Norte: “In the Grand Canyon, Arizona has a natural wonder which is in kind absolutely unparalleled throughout the rest of the world. I want to ask you to keep this great wonder of nature as it now is. Leave it as it is. You cannot improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it.”

The Grand Canyon, of course, is a national park and is protected from all development. With the Rio Grande del Norte we have challenges, for this is a working landscape that embraces traditional land uses such as ranching, hunting, fishing and wood and herb gathering. For example, many local multi-generational ranching families like mine rely on their use of portions of these federal lands for grazing their livestock.

Fortunately, Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and Congressmen Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich are working to ensure these land uses can continue, and that the land will
stay undeveloped. After gathering support over the last few years with a broad cross-section of community members and local businesses, they have introduced legislation to designate two new wilderness areas and safeguard 236,000 acres as a National Conservation Area. The Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Area Establishment Act (H. R. 1241 and S. 667) is crafted to protect the not just grazing but other traditional uses that we have enjoyed for hundreds of years.

The balanced legislation stipulates that a comprehensive conservation and management plan will be prepared, with full opportunity for input from local residents, including grazing permittees and acequias associations. In this sense, the legislation creates an overall conservation framework for the area, and the subsequent conservation plan will fill in essential details. This will be done in an open, public, and democratic process, which assures all of us who live and work here that our voices will be heard in shaping the conservation and management of this tremendous resource.

Permanent protection for the Rio Grande del Norte area will be a gift we can pass down to all the generations of New Mexicans who will follow us. Congress should listen to the many voices who support this bill – ranchers, sportsmen, business owners, local elected officials – and pass this conservation bill currently in Congress.
Supporters optimistic about Taos, Río Arriba county Conservation Area bill
Matthew van Buren
April 10, 2012

Following a trip to Washington, D.C., last week, advocates of the creation of the Río Grande del Norte Conservation Area say they are hopeful the necessary legislation will make it through Congress.

Several representatives from Northern New Mexico traveled to Washington to meet with federal representatives and testify in favor of the Conservation Area before the U.S. House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands. Legislation introduced in the House and Senate would create a 236,000-acre Conservation Area and two wildernesses in Taos and Río Arriba counties, while preserving traditional uses of the land.

U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, introduced HR 1241, which was the subject of the March 29 subcommittee hearing. Rep. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, cosponsored the legislation, while Sens. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, and Tom Udall, D-NM, are working on complementary legislation in the Senate.

Luján addressed the subcommittee, describing the significance of the ties between Northern New Mexico cultures and the land, and arguing that the Río Grande del Norte area is historically important and deserving of permanent protection.

“Before New Mexico was a territory of the United States, land grant communities, rural villages and acequias were governed through the communal management of natural resources, including water, timber, grazing lands, wildlife, herbs and fields that were the life of these communities,” he said. “These traditions still exist today, with many that have direct ties to ancestors that go back 12, 13, sometimes 16 generations ... The threat that development poses to these traditions will negatively impact our culture, making protection of these lands so critical.”

Luján told the subcommittee that years of work with local stakeholders, including communities, land grant communities, grazing permittees, acequia associations and...
others, went into the Río Grande del Norte proposal.

“It’s truly a reflection of how partnership can work and what I hope to be an example of model legislation going forward for the state of New Mexico,” he said. “The legislation not only recognizes and reflects the need to protect these areas, but also takes into account the special access that needs to be allowed for these lands and traditions and cultures of the surrounding communities to thrive.”

Questa Mayor Esther García also testified before the subcommittee, saying her family going back 11 generations has lived and worked in the “unique and beautiful landscape” around the proposed Conservation Area, which she described as “sacred land” and a “truly amazing place.” She said the Conservation Area enjoys the support of the “vast majority” of people in Northern New Mexico.

“Support for this legislation is broad, deep and strong,” she said.

García spoke to the importance of protecting the land and water, acknowledging the Río Grande del Norte’s role as critical wildlife habitat as well as the region’s “long human history.”

Former magistrate judge and rancher Erminio Martínez also traveled to Washington and submitted written testimony to the subcommittee. He said he supports conserving the land and water while allowing traditional uses. He also said he is concerned about the threat of development in the proposed Conservation Area.

“That’s what we’re trying to hold back,” he said. “We have a moral and legal obligation to uphold those resources in the best fashion that we possibly can.”

Martínez said, after attending the subcommittee hearing and meeting with New Mexico’s Congressional Delegation, he feels confident that the Río Grande del Norte Conservation Area has enough support — from local communities to high levels of the federal government — to get the legislation through Congress.

“It was a very productive session that we had,” he said.

García agreed, saying everyone seemed to respond positively to the proposal. The Department of the Interior has advocated for the Conservation Area, and Bureau of Land Management Deputy Director Mike Pool also addressed the subcommittee, saying volcanic formations in the area serve as reminders of its “turbulent geologic past” and that the bill was the product of “many years of discussions and collaboration” with local entities.

Mora County Commissioner and New Mexico Wilderness Alliance representative John Olivas, who also went to Washington last week, said he is pleased that legislation is making its way through the House.

“It went well,” he said. “I’m optimistic.”
N.M.’s Heritage of Wilderness Is at Serious Risk

By Garrett Vene Klasen
New Mexico Public Lands Coordinator, Trout Unlimited
March 17, 2012

Everyone has a story and everyone has history. Tragically, most of us have lost or somehow forgotten important pieces of our story in the passing of generations. Some have a name for this – they call it “progress.” New Mexico is one of the few states in our union that has a complete historical and cultural record with unbroken ties back to the origin of its traditional, land-based cultures.

This epic tale – which is steeped in diversity, tradition and heritage – starts something like this: In the beginning there was nothing but an endless expanse of wild and pristine country completely devoid of humans. Then perhaps 13,000 years ago, a small band of Paleoamericans, the Llano Culture, appeared in our story. And so began the rich cultural history of man upon the wild New Mexican landscape. Over time, the pueblos evolved, followed by Francisco Coronado and his fellow conquistadors, who first explored the Rio Grande Valley in 1540. Like the tribal peoples who came before them, the Spanish settlers who followed and remained upon the untamed land were soon irrevocably transformed by it.

New Mexico’s historical record is a sacred text that begins with one word – wilderness! Our state’s remaining wild places are irreplaceable, iconic cultural heirlooms. Wilderness is the genesis of New Mexico’s story. It is the first sentence in the first chapter of our epic tale; it is undeniably the sacred cornerstone of New Mexican culture. And these last vestiges of New Mexico’s wild lands must be preserved, honored and protected.

Of these sacred lands, I cannot think of two more worthy of protective designation than the Columbine Hondo and El Rio Grande del Norte, both in the northern part of our state. The Columbine Hondo is only 46,000 acres of rugged, critically important alpine headwater terrain in the Carson National Forest. The Rio Grande del Norte corridor, comprising approximately 236,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management lands, is the very heart and soul of northern New Mexico’s traditional cultural agrarian epicenter.

The focal antithero in this saga is time. Time is running out for our wild lands. Some members of Congress would love to see these currently unprotected lands either sold off to private hands or developed in the name of “prosperity and progress.” As we speak, there are a host of bills in Congress cleverly designed to pillage the last pockets of unspoiled backcountry. If they pass, the beginning of New Mexico’s epic tale could someday soon be replaced with Chinese pulp mills, exclusive “ranchette” subdivisions, strip mines and clear cuts.
Considering the political agenda of an increasingly ideologue-led Congress, the reality of this is much more plausible than one might think. Just 472 years ago, nearly the entire landscape of New Mexico was wild and untamed. Back then, our Native peoples and Spanish settlers were peoples of the land. These cultures are so solidly rooted in wilderness that the two simply cannot be considered as separate entities. Despite the odds, relics of the “original wild” still exist in isolated islands within the state’s ever-expanding sea of development and modernization.

Our generation, through a local community and citizen-based federal legislative process, has a unique opportunity to protect these places so that future generations might have a direct tie to their past. We owe this push for protection on our most cherished wild public lands to our children and grandchildren. Without a solid connection to their cultural past, how can they forge a meaningful future?

As part of a diverse, bipartisan coalition of stakeholders – ranging from tribal interests, land grant concessions, grazing permittees, community leaders, businesses, sportsmen, homeowners, and conservationists – we have stood up in support for the protection of these precious lands. I urge all across the state, regardless of political affiliation or personal self interest, to encourage our congressional delegates to protect the Columbine Hondo and Rio Grande del Norte now or risk forever losing your cultural and biological integrity in the name of “progress and prosperity.”
State benefits from protecting public lands

Los Alamos Monitor
March 7, 2012

With its proximity to Bandelier National Monument, the great potential of the Valles Caldera National Preserve, the Jemez National Recreation Area, and adjacent National Forest lands, the opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism in Los Alamos are unparalleled.

Recently, the New Mexico Green Chamber of Commerce reported that in 2008 Bandelier drew more than 200,000 visitors, accounting for $9.3 million in spending and directly supporting 181 jobs. The recent Caldera Action report underscored the local economic benefit of expanded visitation that would attend National Park Service Management of the Valles Caldera. These reports demonstrate that protecting public lands is not just about preserving habitat and sacred cultural treasures; it’s about creating sustainable jobs and attracting visitors to rural New Mexico’s communities.

But the economic promise of our protected lands is at risk.

Conservation laws that protect clean air and water, wildlife and natural areas face unprecedented assaults. While every Congress in recent memory has taken steps to protect our public lands and our ability to hunt, hike, fish, and get outside, some Washington politicians are now focused on undoing our country’s rich outdoor heritage. Sadly, the protection of public lands for future generations has become a political issue.

We should never forget that right here in New Mexico 10 past Presidents—six Republicans and four Democrats—have used the Antiquities Act to protect New Mexico’s historical and natural wonders including Bandelier, Chaco Canyon, Gila Cliff Dwellings, Carlsbad Caverns and White Sands. These protected places serve as economic engines for rural communities and the state as a whole.

Thankfully, President Obama has begun to act more boldly – and take a page from his Democratic and Republican predecessors on public lands issues.

Where Congress cannot make progress, President Obama is going directly to the American people and employing a collaborative approach built from the ground up – resulting in three recent decisions that show a commitment to conserving national treasures.

Last September, in response to widespread support in New Mexico, the Administration approved the establishment of the 570-acre Price’s Dairy as New Mexico’s first urban national wildlife refuge. The Middle Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge, within a half-hour drive of nearly half of New Mexico’s population, will be a place for people to connect with the natural world and for wildlife to find protected habitat.

Last November, President Obama became the 16th president to use the Antiquities Act
when he designated Fort Monroe in Virginia as a national monument. As a result, our nation will never forget our history of embracing and then rejecting slavery.

And most recently, the President and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar enacted a 20-year moratorium on new uranium mining claims on one million acres of public lands next to the Grand Canyon. This prudent decision protects fragile watersheds that millions of Westerners rely upon while allowing careful evaluation and development of existing mining claims.

What does this mean for Los Alamos and the protected public lands that surround it?

Hopefully it means that as the President turns his attention west, our very own gems – Valles Caldera National Preserve, Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area and the Manhattan Project National Park – may all see greater protection and with it the opportunity to grow our region’s tourism economy.

The President has a golden opportunity to protect more lands in the West. We urge him to continue along this path, achieving the change that has been his mantra and protecting our national treasures so that our children and grandchildren can enjoy them.

Kevin Holsapple is the Executive Director of the Los Alamos Commerce & Development Corporation and the Los Alamos Chamber of Commerce.

Tom Jervis is a retired educator and research scientist who worked at the Los Alamos National Lab for more than 20 years. He is the President of the Sangre de Cristo Audubon Society.

http://www.lamonitor.com/content/state-benefits-protecting-public-lands
Activists May Go Straight to Obama

By Karen Peterson / North Opinion Page Editor
Feb 7, 2012

Conservation activists seeking to protect a big swath of northern New Mexico from future development say that they may appeal to President Barack Obama rather than waiting for a sharply divided Congress to act.

Bills to protect between 200,000 and 300,000 acres of land on both sides of the Rio Grande south of the Colorado border, including the Rio Grande Gorge, have twice been introduced by members of New Mexico’s congressional delegation in recent years, but none has yet passed.

“We’re still pushing for legislation,” said Nathan Newcomer, associate director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. “But if Congress can’t get anything done, we’d like to see the president use his authority under the Antiquities Act of 1906, which gives him the authority to act when Congress is unwilling or unable to protect resources.”

The bills sought to designate the area, including San Antonio Mountain west of the Rio Grande and Ute Mountain east of it, as El Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Area, protecting wildlife habitat and putting the area off limits to further development, including oil and gas drilling.

Two new wilderness areas, one for each of the area’s iconic mountains, also were to be created.

Both bills had the support of the state congressional delegation as well as many northern New Mexico constituencies ranging from hunters and anglers to conservationists and outdoor recreationists.

Also in favor of the legislation have been land grant activists, who see the designation as a way to recognize the historical importance of New Mexico’s land grants and enshrine in law traditional community uses of public land like wood and piñon gathering.

In contrast, Newcomer noted, a similar effort to protect Otero Mesa, in the southern part of the state, mainly from oil and gas drilling, has met with some opposition from the surrounding community.

“It’s ridiculous to go through all this when the people in the district support it,” Newcomer said of the northern Rio Grande effort. “But Congress refuses to act.”

The Antiquities Act grants the president the authority to act when Congress is “unwilling or unable to act to protect resources,” Newcomer said.

It has been used by presidents of both parties to create national monuments, including some of the nation’s most famous. Republican President Theodore Roosevelt created the Grand Canyon National Monument — now, of course, a national park — under the act, while Democrat
Jimmy Carter used the law to create the Wrangell-St. Elias National Monument in Alaska, which protects almost 11 million acres.

At the end of his second term, President Bill Clinton used the antiquities law to create three new national monuments in Utah and California that became the subject of vociferous Republican criticism. But it was Republican President George W. Bush who used the act to extend federal protections to the largest area, designating 140,000 square miles of ocean and island off Hawaii as a marine national monument.

A spokeswoman for Sen. Jeff Bingaman, the state’s senior Democrat in Washington, said activists shouldn’t lose patience with the effort in Congress. The current bill is “very much alive,” Jude McCartin said.

“It doesn’t have any detractors,” she said. “That it isn’t on the fast track shouldn’t concern people — Sen. Bingaman continues to pursue it.”

McCartin also noted that presidential action under the Antiquities Act “tends to be a second-term kind of thing.”

“So far as I know, the president is not now inclined to use the Antiquities Act for that purpose,” she said. “Constituents can petition, but I’m not sure there’s anyone drawing up a list for such a thing.”
Protect the Proposed Rio Grande NCA

By Esther Garcia
Mayor, Village of Questa and president, San Antonio del Rio Colorado Land Grant
Jan 29, 2012

As a Hispanic leader in New Mexico, a state that leads the nation with a 46.3 percent Hispanic population, I am writing to convey my strong support for the protection of the environmentally, culturally, and historically rich landscapes of the San Luis Valley and Rio Grande Gorge that encompass the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area in Taos County. Hispano culture and presence in New Mexico is and has always been closely connected to our states rich public lands. These areas provide our families and communities with hunting, recreation, traditions and so much more. Throughout time, they have also brought travelers and tourists, and with them economic development. As such, protecting these natural treasures is an important priority to us, and to our future.

Thanks to the leadership of Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, as well as Congressman Ben Ray Lujan, legislation has been introduced that would protect nearly 236,000 acres in north central New Mexico. The Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act also includes two wilderness areas – the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness, including the iconic Ute Mountain, and the 8,000-acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness. This area includes some of New Mexico’s most spectacular landscapes, including the Rio Grande gorge – which at some places is a half mile wide across, dropping to the Rio Grande River 800 feet below, and is a vital migratory flyway for a number of bird species. In turn, our country would be so much richer preserving both the unique Southwestern landscape and its incredible Western history.

Those of us with deep roots here appreciate that the protection of these landscapes preserves grazing within the National Conservation Area and specifically protects our right to hunt, fish and collect piñon nuts and firewood. It directs the Bureau of Land Management to protect the cultural, natural and scenic resources in the area, and protects rights granted under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This measure will help ensure that these ancestral lands will remain for future generations to come.

Lands like the Valle Vidal and the Latir and Wheeler Peak Wildernesses in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains have played large roles in Hispano life and culture throughout northern New Mexico’s history. Hunting and traditional gathering activities continue to this day, and bind generations of Hispano families together. Surging interest amongst Hispanic sportsmen also means more families are taking to our wilderness in pursuit of Rocky Mountain mule deer, blue grouse, and elk in Taos County.

While New Mexico’s congressional delegation is working very hard to ensure that this bipartisan piece of legislation passes through Congress. Congress has
proven itself to be incapable of moving any form of legislation, no matter how much local support exists back home. Fortunately, President Obama has the authority under the 1906 Antiquities Act to designate public lands as National Monuments when Congress is unwilling or unable to act. If Congress continues to operate in such a dysfunctional manner, then the president should use his authority under the Antiquities Act to protect places like the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area.

Recent polls demonstrate that New Mexicans strongly support protecting these lands, with the highest support amongst the Hispanic population and the community of Taos. I firmly believe now is the time for action to protect the unique Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, and to secure our rich cultural heritage, natural resources, and economic potential of Northern New Mexico forever.
WASHINGTON – Three bills written by Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall to benefit New Mexico were heard by the Senate today. A hearing marks the first step toward Congressional passage.

One of the bills the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on Public Lands considered today was the Río Grande del Norte Conservation Establishment Act, which would protect approximately 236,000 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Taos and Río Arriba counties by designating a combination of “conservation” and “wilderness” areas.

Most of the land, 214,600 acres, would be managed as a conservation area. Two other areas in Cerro del and Río San Antonio will be managed as wilderness.

Senators Bingaman and Udall also introduced a bill to allow New Mexico to spend federal funds to cleanup abandoned uranium mines. The bill allocates funds to be used for non-coal cleanup.

Finally, the Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2011 was introduced, which expands the scope of the Public Lands Corps to reflect new challenges, such as climate change.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. - New Mexico's Rio Grande del Norte region was first proposed for wilderness designation in the 1980s, and Congress is taking the first step toward making it happen.

The Senate Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests will hear testimony today from those in support of Senate Bill 667, which would turn 21,000 acres of the Rio Grande del Norte into a wilderness area. The tract nearly won the designation last year, and John Olivas, northern director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, thinks the chances are better this year.

"There has not been any development that has occurred within the area, so the area is still pristine. The area has been considered by some folk as the 'Grand Canyon' of northern New Mexico."

The wilderness would be part of a 235,000-acre conservation area.

Garrett Veneklasen, a volunteer with Trout Unlimited-New Mexico, says saving wilderness is part of the New Mexican culture.

"The land and the special cultures of New Mexico are so closely tied to one another that you can't separate them. For the preservation of the culture, it's really, really important that we preserve the land."

Veneklasen says the area is also a vital bird migratory flyway.

The text of SB 667, the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, is online at e-lobbyist.com.
The Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce is one of the many supporters of the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, reintroduced recently by four members of our Congressional delegation, led by Sen. Bingaman and Rep. Lujan.

The community supports this measure because we recognize the need to preserve some of our land to be able to continue our traditions and way of life here.

Safeguarding 236,000 acres in Taos and Rio Arriba counties as a conservation area, while allowing for grazing and the collection of firewood and piñon nuts to continue, benefits all concerned.

We support the bill because it is good for businesses that are a fit with the environment and the lifestyles of the region.

Wilderness and other protected natural areas attract visitors from across the state and the nation — people who come to hunt, hike and explore, and who leave their dollars behind with local businesses.

Sportsmen want to see these areas protected so that the wildlife population can thrive and their hunting traditions can be passed down to the next generation.

Birders appreciate that the bill will safeguard the Rio Grande migratory flyway — one of the great migratory routes in the world. This bill merits being enacted in this Congress.

Merl Witt
President Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce
Sacred landscapes
The Taos News (NM)
April 21, 2011

I want to thank Sens. Bingaman and Udall and to Reps. Lujan and Heinrich for introducing, a bill that would create the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area on 236,000 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Taos and Rio Arriba counties.

True conservation of these lands will include all of us in actively protecting the waters of our local springs and ritos and the great river, itself. A Rio Grande del Norte NCA would give us a tool for the protection of places the community holds dear.

As the owner of one of our local river touring companies, I am privileged to introduce all sorts of people to the sacred landscapes along the Rio Grande. Designating a National Conservation Area will help make it possible for visitors and residents to maintain a personal connection with the Rio Arriba region, extending official protection to its most important natural and cultural values. In addition, successful passage of this legislation can help elevate the region’s profile as a premier outdoor tourism destination and assist in developing our local green economy.

I hope that the readers of The Taos News will also express their support for this conservation initiative to our elected officials.

Steve Harris
Far-Flung Adventures
The reintroduction of the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishing Act came as a wonderful surprise to me and my family.

On a good weekend, when not busy with work, we pack up and head out for an adventure to explore the gorges, rivers and maybe spot an eagle or bighorn sheep. In Northern New Mexico, our land is our livelihood, and we don't want to lose it when we need it most. Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and Reps. Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich should be applauded for their leadership on this important legislation.

Because the act didn't pass last year before Congress adjourned, people across Northern New Mexico have been appealing for a fast reintroduction. I sure hope the clock doesn't run out this Congress.

Sean Gabriel
Santa Fe
Opinion: Bill honors tradition, backs sustainable tourism

By Stuart Wilde
April 14, 2011

On March 29, Sen. Jeff Bingaman reintroduced legislation, with support from Sen. Tom Udall, as well as Reps. Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich, which would designate nearly 236,000 acres of the Rio Grande Gorge Corridor and Taos Volcanic Plateau, from the Colorado border to Pilar as the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area.

This bill marks the culmination of decades of effort by local residents, conservation groups, outfitters, recreationists, and sportsmen, to protect what has been called, “New Mexico’s Grand Canyon.”

This unique legislation honors Northern New Mexico’s traditional cultures by including specific verbiage about land grant communities, and includes historical uses like grazing, pi-on gathering and firewood collection.

The bill also establishes two new wilderness areas: the Cerro del Yuta (Ute Mountain), and the Rio San Antonio. This proposed NCA includes some of the most rugged and magnificent country in Northern New Mexico.

The Rio Grande Gorge is one the defining features of Taos County, and is one of its most valuable natural resources and popular attractions, in terms of its outstanding scenic beauty, and world class recreational opportunities.

This National Conservation Area will attract new visitors, and promote sustainable economic development, with a model that respects the land and local communities, and won’t destroy the scenic beauty that makes Taos such a special place.

Kudos and big thanks to Sen. Bingaman, for his long-term commitment to the preservation of New Mexico’s natural and cultural heritage.

Stuart Wilde, of Questa, is the owner of Wild Earth Llama Adventures.
Conservation Area Would Be Ideal
April 13, 2011

I want to thank Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and Reps. Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Luján for introducing a bill that would create the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area on 236,000 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Taos and Río Arriba counties.

True conservation of these lands will need the folks with Taos in their hearts actively protecting the waters of our local springs and ríos and the great river, itself. A Río Grande del Norte NCA would give local folks a tool for the protection of places the community holds dear.

As the owner of one of New Mexico's river touring companies, I am privileged to introduce all sorts of people to the sacred landscapes along the Río Grande. Designating a National Conservation Area will help make it possible for visitors and residents to maintain their personal connection with the Río Arriba region, extending official protection to its striking natural and cultural values.

In addition, successful passage of this legislation would elevate the region's profile as a premier outdoor tourism destination and assist in developing the local green economy of which we here are so proud.

I hope that the readers of the Journal will also express their support for this conservation initiative to our elected officials.

Steve Harris
Embudo
Act is back!
The Santa Fe New Mexican
April 12, 2011

The reintroduction of Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishing Act on March 29 is a huge win for Northern New Mexico. Our Democratic congressional delegation — Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall (co-sponsors) and Congressmen Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich (co-sponsors) deserve praise from people here in Northern New Mexico for taking the step in this 112th Congress to preserve 236,000 acres in Taos County.


John Olivas
Holman, N.M.
Fed bill aims again to conserve 240K acres in Taos and Río Arriba counties

The Taos News
By Matthew van Buren
April 9, 2011

U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) has reintroduced a bill to designate nearly 240,000 acres in Taos and Río Arriba counties as conservation and wilderness areas.

Senator Tom Udall is cosponsoring the legislation, and U.S. Reps. Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Luján introduced a House version of the bill. A similar bill died in the last Congress.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) currently manages what would become the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area. About 214,000 acres would be managed as a conservation area, according to a release from Bingaman's office, and the 13,400-acre Cerro del Yuta to the east and 8,000-acre Río San Antonio to the west would be managed as wildernesses.

According to information from the BLM, the bureau manages nearly 9 million acres of wilderness in 10 states.

Questa Mayor Esther García has been involved in the effort to create the conservation area. She said she grew up visiting the Wild Rivers area with her father and grandfather, and she wanted legislation in place to prevent oil and gas drilling, as well as other activities that could harm the environment.

"I think it's important, because I'd like to preserve that beautiful area," she said. "I would like to protect and preserve it for future generations."

García said those who crafted the legislation gathered a lot of input from locals, and the bill allows for traditional uses to continue, such as fishing, hunting, grazing and collecting piñon and firewood.

"We included what the people wanted," García said. "To me, that was really important."

Congress designates National Conservation Areas, according to the BLM, "to conserve, protect, enhance and manage public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

In New Mexico, the BLM manages the 262,100-acre El Malpais National Conservation Area and the 24,950-acre Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area, which includes the state's third longest cave. Under the reintroduced bill, the Wild and Scenic Rivers area would become a designated conservation area, according to the Bingaman release, "protecting elk wintering grounds and migratory corridors along the plateau between Ute Mountain and San..."
Antonio Mountain."

The two new wilderness areas would sit to the west and east of the conservation area, with the Río San Antonio Wilderness sitting northwest of San Antonio Mountain and the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness area protecting Ute Mountain.

Ron Gardiner, a land and water use consultant from Questa, said he became involved in the conservation area effort more than two decades ago to "bring some recognition to the landscape and the ecosystem that the Rio Grande Gorge travels through" as well as give the BLM "a little stronger handle" on managing the area. He said it is important that it be managed as a unit rather than "parceled apart."

"It's all tied together," he said. "Anybody who's been in that canyon knows what a special place it is."

Outfitter Stuart Wilde, of Wild Earth Llama Adventures, said he is excited the legislation has been reintroduced in order to protect the conservation area for future generations. He also said he is glad the bill addresses the concerns of land grant heirs, and historical uses of the area will be allowed to continue.

"This really wasn't about removing people from a valuable resource," he said.

Wilde also emphasized the importance of the conservation area to economic development in Taos County.
Opinion: Thanks for the federal conservation bill’s return

The Taos News (NM)
By Esther Garcia
April 8, 2011

Meeting with a group of second-graders is not a regular part of my daily schedule but earlier this year, I did just that.

The children had been learning about our government, and their teacher had them write me letters with suggestions on how to make our community a better place.

Sitting down with them at a local bookstore, I got a chance to hear what was on their minds. "Wish lists" included things like a skate park, a swimming pool, and a zoo.

I wasn't surprised that many of their ideas had to do with outdoor activities — finding more places where kids can play with other kids and interact with the animals that are such a vital part of New Mexico's cultural and natural heritage.

Fortunately for all of us, there are some really special places right in our own backyard where children can get outside, visit the surrounding public lands near Questa that include Wild Rivers Recreation Area, Columbine Hondo Wilderness Study Area, Latir Wilderness and Valle Vidal.

These areas provide an opportunity that allows the children to challenge themselves as well as see an amazing variety of wildlife.

Right here in Northern New Mexico is one of the great migratory bird routes in the world: the Rio Grande Migratory Flyway, which lies in the heart of the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area.

Eagles, falcons and hawks make the walls of the Rio Grande Gorge their nesting homes. The honking of hundreds of sandhill cranes migrating over the San Luis Valley to places like Bosque Del Apache continues to delight children and adults who visit the tablelands west of the river.

From the edge of the Gorge, grass and sagebrush mesas are interconnected with the forested slopes of volcanic formations such as Cerro Chiflo, Cerro del Aire, Montosos and Cerro de la Olla. It is on these mesas that vast herds of pronghorn and elk find winter forage and calve and fawn along the rim late in the spring.

Passing this precious land down to the next generation of New Mexicans is our responsibility.

Fortunately, Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall (cosponsor) and Reps. Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich (co-sponsor) have reintroduced Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act,
which didn't make it through the last Congress before it adjourned.

This important measure will protect 236,000 acres around the Rio Grande Gorge from development of all kinds, while preserving our traditional ways of life and boosting our economy by attracting visitors who leave their dollars behind.

Ute Mountain will be given the strongest form of protection as part of a new 13,500-acre Cerro del Yuta wilderness. Another, smaller area — the 8,000-acre San Antonio wilderness — will also be designated.

By establishing this "gold standard" of protection, we can be sure that future generations of New Mexicans will be able to experience and enjoy all this wild land has to offer.

Bingaman's bill specifically protects our right to hunt, fish, collect piñon nuts and firewood within the conservation area — traditions we depend on. Grazing will continue where it exists today.

The measure will not affect water rights or private property, and recognizes existing rights of way for vehicle access and utilities.

The Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area will protect the area around the Gorge, making sure our descendants will come to know the mesa as we know it.

That's why land grant members support the bill. This conservation bill makes good sense, both socially and economically.

But more than that, it is a trust we inherited from grandparents and ancestors that came before us.

We all need to be good stewards of the land, to ensure that this shared natural treasure will be part of our grandchildren's heritage.

Long after our kids lose interest in skate parks and zoos, they will appreciate that this wild land remains as it has always been — an anchor in their lives, a place for a hike or a hunt, a living reminder of the generations that preceded them and a precious gift that they can hand down to their own grandchildren.

Esther García is the mayor of the village of Questa and president of the San Antonio de Río Colorado Land Grant.
Lawmakers deserve thanks for measure
Las Vegas Optic
April 7, 2011

The reintroduction of Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishing Act in Taos County on March 29 is a huge win for northern New Mexico. Our Democratic congressional delegation — Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall and Reps. Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich deserve praise from people here in northern New Mexico for taking the step in this 112th Congress to preserve 236,000 acres in north central New Mexico. Please take a moment to call the delegation thanking them for their work.

• Sen. Bingaman: 202-224-5521
• Sen. Tom Udall: 202- 224-6621
• Rep. Martin Heinrich: 202-225-6316

In 2009, Sabinoso Wilderness in eastern San Miguel County was signed into law by President Barrack Obama as one of his first pieces of legislation. Conservation of our public lands is a responsibility we must all share so that our children and grandchildren will be able to experience the land as we do today. The preservation of our land, water and wildlife is crucial to all of us so we can pass it on to future generations.

As a leader in my community, small business owner and conservation advocate, I want to recognize our congressional delegation for the great work they are doing to preserve our lands here in northern New Mexico.

John Olivas
Mora County Commissioner District 2
Editorial: Treasured terrain worth saving
April 3, 2011

Jeff Bingaman's legacy to his country and the state he's served in the U.S. Senate already is a great one; among many other items are the Valle Vidal and the preservation of the Valles Caldera in the Jemez Mountains, both carried out in cooperation with the now-retired Sen. Pete Domenici.

But Bingaman is well aware that there are other treasures to be set aside for future generations. Now that he's announced his impending retirement, he's making another effort: He's re-introducing the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area bill.

It didn't make it through the last Congress, but it's a long-overdue measure: It would create a 236,000-acre conservation area near the Río Grande Gorge, and it would set aside two federally designated wilderness areas: 8,000 acres of San Antonio Mountain and 13,000 acres of that highly visible knoll known as Ute Mountain rising above the San Luis Valley along the Colorado border.

The vast majority of the land already is in the hands of the federal Bureau of Land Management, while other parts are held by the State Land Office, which appears willing to swap that acreage for other property. Private holdings wouldn't be condemned, although buyouts might be offered. And what's really appealing about the Bingaman proposal is that it will specifically protect existing ranching within the conservation area.

But no new roads would be allowed — and the bill would prohibit mineral development and put a stop to sales of public land. Hunting, fishing, piñon-gathering and other traditional uses would be protected.

Sen. Tom Udall and Reps. Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich are in support — with good reason:

It would preserve one of our nation's last outstanding ecosystems, rugged land isolated by the great gorge — and so dry and rugged that it discouraged settlement.

It's a land of eagles and hawks; elk, antelope and bighorn sheep; of cougars, bobcats and bears. It was long ago described as land without water; enough, perhaps, for wildlife — but not enough to invite villages or towns.

Its touristic possibilities, however, are great — not only for visitors willing to abide by the rules of nonmechanization that come with national wildernesses, but also as part of the open-land setting that never fails to astound city dwellers on vacation.

This is terrain well worth preserving. We salute Sens. Bingaman and Udall, along with Reps. Luján and Heinrich, for recognizing the need to set it aside — and we wish them well as they guide it across Capitol Hill.
'El Norte' Protection Rises Again in DC

Public News Service (NM)
Eric Mack
Thursday, March 31, 2011

TAOS, N.M. - A bill to protect wild lands near the Rio Grande in northern New Mexico was reintroduced this week by retiring Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M. The Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act mirrors a previous bill.

John Olivas, owner of JACO outfitters and a Mora County commissioner, says the bill would fill a gap in protection for an area around Taos that has become the epicenter of New Mexico's growing ecotourism industry.

"There's a chain of protected areas like the Valle Vidal, Latir Wilderness, Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area, the Pecos Wilderness. This would just be one more jewel in northern New Mexico that helps protect public land."

Oscar Simpson, vice chair of the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers in New Mexico, says preserving key areas for wildlife and recreation is a vital part of the local economic base.

"Wildlife viewing, recreation, and hunting and fishing - they all tie in with making sure that we've got a sustainable ecosystem, but also have an economic engine that supports the local economy."

Simpson says the areas that would be protected include some critical habitat for elk, deer and antelope.

The bill would protect about 236,000 acres of public land in Taos and Rio Arriba counties, and preserve traditional uses of the land that are part of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The Senate bill is co-sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M. Reps. Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Lujan, both D-N.M., have introduced a companion bill in the House.
TAOS, N.M.—Members of New Mexico’s congressional delegation are continuing to push for the designation of conservation and wilderness areas in Taos and Rio Arriba counties.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman on Tuesday reintroduced legislation that would preserve about 236,000 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management by designating a combination of conservation and wilderness areas.

Much of the land—214,600 acres—would be managed as a conservation area. Two other parcels would be managed as wilderness.


Reps. Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich have introduced a similar bill in the U.S. House.
Opinion: Warming world needs new way to thrive naturally
The Santa Fe New Mexican (NM)
Norma McCallan
October 23, 2010

New Mexico is blessed with spectacular scenery, a benign climate, fantastic sunsets, lush forests, beautiful wildflowers and picturesque deserts. It is a place where you want to be outdoors, soaking in the bright sunshine, the clear blue skies, the layers of mountains on the horizon, the pungent smell of piñon fires in the winter and vanilla-laced ponderosa in the summer.

As President Barack Obama's administration begins to formulate a 21st-century strategy for America's great outdoors to better protect our natural landscape for generations to come, the Sierra Club's Rio Grande Chapter urges his Great Outdoors Initiative to consider the following recommendations, many of which were expressed at the well-attended listening session in Albuquerque last July.

We must start managing our lands, public and private, for the effects of climate change. Already stressed by urban sprawl, pollution from the Four Corners power plants and the poorly regulated oil and gas drilling in the San Juan Basin, degradation from increasing off-road vehicle use, and the die-off of large numbers of piñons from the bark beetle, our land and precious water are at greater risk than ever before.

We must seek landscape-level conservation policies, while continuing to protect our existing open space acreage. Our Santa Fe and Carson national forests are a huge asset, in that they not only provide multiple opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, photography, skiing and bird watching, but they are the source of our rivers and streams, and their old-growth trees are a great carbon sink that we must preserve as our population expands and our collective carbon footprints grow larger every year.

The state, counties, pueblos and tribes, as well as private landowners, should receive incentives to incorporate their lands into these integrated large landscape conservation programs by, for example, protecting traditional small farms and ranches that provide open space and wildlife corridors as well as bringing us healthy, locally grown foods.

The initiative should protect large core areas of wildlands that give wildlife the space and connectivity necessary to adapt and allow
migration as the climate warms. Thank goodness for the Pecos Wilderness and recently acquired Sabinosa Wilderness, but we must permanently protect other special landscapes, such as the proposed El Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, the Columbine Hondo with its important watersheds, and the unique geology and fossils in the San Juan Basin Badlands.

We need to reconnect many Americans, and especially our children, with nature. Childhood obesity worsens, diabetes has risen by 40 percent in New Mexico over the last 10 years, while youth spend on average 7.5 hours a day "plugged in." Studies show time spent in nature increases test scores and positive attitudes. We should encourage school gardens; urban trails; Job Corps programs; sidewalks; bike paths; accessible parks; and school trips to our public lands.

Enhancing sustainable development through tourism and recreation will benefit local communities. Getting outside is a great way for people to experience nature, develop a conservation ethic and stay healthy.

Climate change is the largest threat to our natural heritage. Here in New Mexico, bird counts are down significantly; deer, elk, and bighorn sheep are declining; and Rio Grande trout are struggling to survive. Let's change the way we think about our landscape, and build resilience into our ecosystems to help them adapt to a warming world, so that New Mexico's outdoors remains enchanting.

*Norma McCallan is the vice chairman of the Sierra Club's Rio Grande Chapter. She lives in Santa Fe.*
Saturday marks the 30th anniversary of the Sandia Wilderness Addition, which added an important piece of this Albuquerque backdrop to the National Wilderness Preservation System. "This month we celebrate the vision our lawmakers had three decades ago to complete protection of a key piece of our natural heritage - the spectacular Sandia Mountains," said Stephen Capra, executive director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. "The large number of people who visit this treasure every year are testament to the belief that some wild areas and quiet recreation should remain so in perpetuity."

"Thanks to New Mexicans ranging from Pete Domenici to Clinton Anderson to Aldo Leopold, we have a wonderful public lands legacy in New Mexico - one I hope to continue," said U.S. Rep. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M.

"Today in New Mexico, after more than 30 years we have the opportunity to carry on that vision, and call on Congress to move quickly to enact the protection of sizable amounts of public land, including the Organ Mountains-Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act and the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act," said Capra. "These proposals will forever protect special places in both northern and southern New Mexico, and help raise the amount of lands protected. Currently only 2 percent of our state has wilderness protection, making us last in the West in the amount of protected public lands," Capra said.

The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, introduced by Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, would designate nearly 260,000 acres of wilderness in Doña Ana County near Las Cruces, and create a 150,000-acre National Conservation Area. The Rio Grande bill, also sponsored by the New Mexico senators, would protect 235,000 acres northwest of Taos as a conservation area, including more than 21,000 acres of designated wilderness.

"Protecting wilderness - our common ground - is a New Mexican value. Over the years it has been championed by people on both sides of the aisle," Capra said. "It is fitting that the Sandia Wilderness Addition was sponsored by former Republican Senator Pete Domenici, who said at the time that the area ‘forms a beautiful natural backdrop for the city which all the residents can enjoy.'"
An environmental group has named Roberta Salazar, founder of Rivers and Birds, as its "Wilderness Hero" of the month.

The Pew Environment Group's Campaign for America's Wilderness gave the award to recognize her work connecting young people with nature.

After founding Rivers and Birds in 1999, Salazar has worked with local children to instill in them understanding of the local land and ecosystem that all Northern New Mexico residents depend on.

Salazar also founded the Nature Immersion Project, taking fifth-graders out of the classroom and into their surroundings to give the children the experience and values that develop an understanding of the need for conservation.

Salazar has also been instrumental in building local support for the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Act. This bill, now before the full U.S. Senate, if enacted would establish a conservation area of 235,000 acres northwest of Taos.

"I appreciate the award," Salazar said. "I am also humble about it. This award is not about me, but rather this award is about an important community conservation effort that I have been involved in to ensure the success of passage of the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Act."

"For her work to protect special wild places and to instill a love of the land in New Mexico's children, we salute Roberta Salazar as a 'Wilderness Hero'," said Mike Matz, who directs the Campaign for America's Wilderness at the Pew Environment Group. "Our Wilderness Hero program highlights the work of everyday Americans making a difference in the effort to protect some of the nation's last wild places for future generations to use and enjoy."

Salazar has not let her work on the legislation affect Rivers and Birds programs with New Mexico Children. The nonprofit is currently fundraising to bring the Watershed Program back to local children.

In the spring Rivers and Birds conducts a program that will take local second grade students into nature to learn about water conservation four days out of the week. Rivers and Birds is also recruiting teenagers from the community to complete wilderness surveys for Carson National Forest in the summer.

When asked how Taos County residents can get involved Salazar said "The first step would be to immerse oneself in the natural world as much as possible. By intimately getting to know our natural heritage of Taos..."
County one can't help but become an advocate for the wild."

She also encourages local residents to show their support for the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act.

"Right now it is important for everyone to contact Sens. Bingaman and Udall as well as Rep. Luján to voice local citizen support of the Río Grande del Norte Conservation Act," she said.

"Rivers and Birds' efforts continue to focus on teaching conservation values and providing joyful experiences in nature for youth," Salazar said "It ensures that future generations will be able to know this land, as we love and know it now."
Northern NM conservation bill goes to Senate

Albuquerque Journal (NM)
Associated Press
Thursday, December 17, 2009

TAOS, N.M.- A bill that would protect about 370 square miles of public land in northern New Mexico has passed the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman said Wednesday the bill would protect the Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Taos and Rio Arriba counties. The measure is co-sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall.

Bingaman says the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Gorge and the Taos Plateau would be managed as a conservation area. The area has elk and is a wintering ground for migratory birds.

Two areas would be managed as wilderness. They area the 13,400-acre Cerro del Yuta, which contains an extinct volcano called Ute Mountain, and the 8,000-acre Rio San Antonio.

The bill now goes to the full Senate.
Land Preserve; Bill would cover 330,000 acres in northern N.M.
Albuquerque Journal (NM)
Phil Parker
Tuesday, October 13, 2009

From 10,000 feet off the ground, the piece of Colorado north of Taos looks segmented into perfect rectangles by a series of roads. The plots appear ripe for development.

The state border in this bit of America is stark, because, on New Mexico's side, there are very few roads and the plains stretch for miles with only sporadic intrusions by modern society, like a solitary road or house.

Conservationists in New Mexico want to keep the area unmolested in perpetuity, and, on Sunday, several interested parties were flown over the roughly 330,000-acre section of this state that has been proposed for protection under U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman's El Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, introduced into legislation in April and co-sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M.

A Journal reporter was in one of the 11 small planes circling the sky above the land, which runs north from about Taos, between San Antonio Mountain and Ute Mountain, and ends at the Colorado border.

The Rio Grande Gorge runs like a massive crack along the east end of the proposed national conser-vation area, and on Sunday changing leaves in the aspens looked like golden rivers running through surrounding mountains.

Also in a plane was a representative for Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M. David Ehrman of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance said his group hopes Luján will introduce a bill similar to Bingaman's in the House.

If the legislation is passed, Ehrman said: "It would mean there won't be any drilling. This area would be forever opened to the people and the wildlife, but there will be no ATVs, no developments, no drilling."

Ehrman said New Mexico has the least amount of land designated as "wilderness" of any Western state. Though the occasional road over the proposed acreage prevents some of it from being labeled as official "wilderness," it would all be designated a "conservation area," leaving it essentially undisturbed. (The bill allows for continued collection of piñon nuts and firewood in the area, as well as cattle grazing. Bingaman's office has said these touches came through input with surrounding communities.)

Herds of elk could be seen from the sky Sunday as they made their way across the plains east of San Antonio Mountain.
Bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, cougars and otters also call the area home. In the skies, eagles, falcons and hawks can be seen, and they make nests in the Rio Grande Gorge.

"Our children and the state of New Mexico benefit long term with the protection of this land," said Kent Salazar of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation.

"If you've never been there, you need to go, because it's a special wildlife area. It's got incredible scenery and fishing. ... People are stressed a lot, and they need nature. We're getting away from that."

Salazar said that, apart from wrecking the scenery, drilling this section of New Mexico could destroy an underground aquifer crucial to the surrounding areas.
Another conservation effort

John Olivas
Friday, September 18, 2009

Forty-five years ago this month, a bipartisan group of lawmakers agreed to legislation that would have a lasting impact on our nation's public lands - not by changing them, but by making sure some portion of these magnificent wild places would stay as they were for all time and for all generations to use and enjoy. The Wilderness Act, signed into law Sept. 3, 1964, was acknowledgement that our public lands are part of what shape us as a people and that there is value in protecting some of them in their pristine state as a natural legacy.

Over the last four and a half decades, this act, which created the National Wilderness Preservation System, has been used to forever protect some of New Mexico's wild treasures, including the Gila, Aldo Leopold, and Blue Range Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico, and the Pecos, Wheeler Peak, and Latir Peak in the northern part of the state. Earlier this year, after years of work by sportsmen, conservationists, business leaders and ranchers, the Sabinoso Wilderness, located in eastern San Miguel County, became one of the nation's newest wilderness areas. Sabinoso Wilderness was part of a major lands package that was signed into law by President Barack Obama in March, which protected 16,030 acres for future generations.

A similar group of diverse interests have been working with Sen. Jeff Bingaman to add more special wild places to the wilderness treasury. Efforts are underway to designate the Cerro de Yuta Wilderness and the Rio San Antonio Wilderness as part of a measure introduced by the Senator to create the 235,980-acre El Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area. His bill, which has won the backing of the Taos County Commission and the support of the Mora Valley and Taos County Chambers of Commerce, would ensure that this wildlife and botanically rich area would stay as it is - for camping, hunting, fishing, and quiet solitude. The legislation would preserve an important part of our natural heritage, an area that boasts high-mesa sagebrush grasslands, woodlands of piñon juniper, and extinct volcano cinder cones.

The senator has crafted his bill to allow for longstanding traditions to continue, such as grazing and the collection of firewood and piñon nuts, and protects land-grant members their rights granted under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

We applaud this conservation effort and hope to see it become the law of the land as soon as possible.

John Olivas is a Mora County resident and member New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. He may be reached at avidelksman@yahoo.com [1] or 575-387-2665
Opinion: Our landscape is a national treasure

Ron Gardiner
Friday, September 4, 2009

From an overview the Río Grande neatly splits Taos County in two from north to south.

Yet, this "River of Destiny" for three states and two countries, draws New Mexicans together in our unique richness of life as it flows through our communities.

This river of life enters New Mexico in the most dramatic and unique manners in the lower San Luis Valley at the Colorado border near Ute Mountain. The Taos Plateau is as dramatic a landscape as exists on the planet.

For anyone who has ever entered Taos from the south it is nearly impossible to not be overtaken by the view rising above the horseshoe curve. There cradled against the peaks of the Sangre De Cristos is the expansive mesa of this high desert valley.

It is more a terrestrial ocean punctuated with the volcanic islands of an archipelago. Most dramatic is the massive cleft splitting the high mesa north to south and spreading it east to west. This canyon - the gorge - is one of the real signatures sights of New Mexico.

It is crowned by a geologic backdrop of free-standing volcanoes unmatched in the American landscape. These free-standing mountains are named: Ute, San Antonio, Chiflo, Cerro De Olla, Cerro Montosso, Cerro Aire and Guadalupe. Not only are they unique landmarks to people but they serve as ancient markers along our continental migratory highway that has directed the ebb and flow of wildlife in western America for all time.

These ancient migrations through our state are the aboriginal heritage of our continent and yet they are as vital and relevant to the diversity of bird and wildlife today as they were millenniums ago. The El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area that Sen. Jeff Bingaman is now championing in Congress truly captures and preserves one of the last great American ecosystems.

It is home to large elk and antelope herds and nationally significant eagle and falcon nesting areas on the canyon walls. In the canyon bottom the river provides a world class trout fishery and a wild home for otter and beaver. Cougar, big horn sheep, bob cat, ring tail cat and bear are all residents and visitors to the broken layers of talus slopes of the gorge's basalt walls. Because this area is already 95 percent state and federal land there is a unique opportunity for it to be spared from parceling or development.
One of the primary reasons that it has remained undeveloped so far is due to the fact that the core of this National Conservation Area has been known as the "Land of No Water" since described by Don Diego de Vargas in 1695. It is an arid rugged landscape for people which is centered on the Punche (Tobacco) Valley.

This remoteness makes it a Mecca for our wild friends. It offers however, a unique opportunity for people to visit our wild friends in the setting that they have evolved and thrived in for generations. People of the Taos Plateau have found this place an important source of fishing, hunting and grazing sustenance from the times of the original pueblos and Spanish settlements until today. In the time of the first pueblos these were their buffalo plains.

Communities such as Questa, Hondo, Cerro, Pilar and Antonito have been bound economically and spiritually to this area west of the canyon since their establishment centuries ago. Under Sen. Bingaman's legislation all of these multiple uses and traditional ways of life will be preserved along with the natural values of this area. This national conservation area will truly capture the full character of this unique natural habitat where both wild and human communities co-exist in a balance that serves both. You cannot read the histories of the pueblos, the acequia culture, the mountain men, and the Taos painters, Kit Carson or Aldo Leopold without being aware of this landscape as the stage on which much of our rich history has played out.

The landscape that we enjoy daily is truly our country's treasure and should be treated as such. We should support Sen. Bingaman and the New Mexico delegation in their efforts to write the next chapter of history that recognizes this place as a national treasure and a gemstone in the eternal character of New Mexico.

**Ron Gardiner is a land and water use consultant. He established extensive wildlife and raptor surveys.**
Proposed near-Taos conservation area is a state jewel

By Ron Gardiner
Sunday, July 19, 2009

From an overview, the Río Grande neatly splits New Mexico in two from north to south. Yet, this "River of Destiny" for three states and two countries, draws New Mexicans together in our unique richness of life as it flows through our communities. Much of its path through New Mexico is relaxed and adorned with the cottonwood bosques that we so love to live next to and enjoy their shady breezes.

But, this river of life enters New Mexico in the most dramatic and unique manner in the lower San Luis Valley at the Colorado border. The Taos Plateau is as dramatic a landscape as exists on the planet. For anyone who has ever entered Taos from the south, it is nearly impossible to not be overtaken by the view rising above the Horseshoe Curve. There cradled against the peaks of the Sangre de Cristos is the expansive mesa of this high desert valley. It is more a terrestrial ocean punctuated with the volcanic islands of an archipelago.

But most dramatic is the massive cleft splitting the high mesa north to south and spreading it east to west. This canyon - the gorge - is one of the real signature sights of New Mexico. It is crowned by a geologic backdrop of free-standing volcanoes unmatched in the American landscape.

These free-standing mountains are named: Ute, San Antonio, Chiflo, Cerro de Olla, Cerro Montoso and Guadalupe. Not only are they unique landmarks, they serve as ancient markers along our continental migratory highway that has directed the ebb and flow of wildlife in Western America for all time.

These ancient migrations through our state are the aboriginal heritage of our continent and yet they are as vital and relevant to the diversity of bird and wildlife today as they were millenniums ago.

The El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area that Sen. Jeff Bingaman is now championing in Congress truly captures and preserves one of the last great American ecosystems. It is home to large elk and antelope herds and nationally significant eagle and falcon nesting areas on the canyon walls. In the canyon bottom, the river provides a world class trout fishery and a wild home for otter and beaver. Cougar, big horn sheep, bobcat, ringtailed cat and bear are all residents and visitors to the broken layers of talus slopes of the gorge's basalt walls.

Because this area is already 95 percent state and federal land, there is a unique opportunity for it to be spared from
parceling or development. One of the primary reasons that it has remained undeveloped so far is because the core of this area has been known as the "Land of No Water" since it was described by Don Diego de Vargas in 1695. It is an arid rugged landscape for people centered on the Punche (Tobacco) Valley. This remoteness makes it a paradise for our wild friends. It offers however, a unique opportunity for people to visit our wild friends in the setting that they have evolved and thrived in for generations.

People of the Taos Plateau have found this place an important source of fishing, hunting and grazing sustenance from the times of the original pueblos and Spanish settlements until today. In the time of the first pueblos, these were their buffalo plains. Communities such as Questa, Hondo, Cerro, Pilar and Antonito have been bound to this area economically and spiritually since their establishment centuries ago.

Under Sen. Bingaman's legislation, all of these multiple uses and traditional ways of life would be preserved, along with the natural values of this area. This national conservation area would truly capture the full character of this unique natural habitat, where both wild and human communities coexist in a balance that serves both.

You cannot read the histories of the pueblos, the acequia culture, the mountain men, and the Taos Colony painters, Kit Carson or Aldo Leopold without being aware of this landscape as the stage on which much of our rich history has played out.

We should all support Sen. Bingaman and the New Mexico delegation in their efforts to write the next chapter of history that recognizes this place as a national treasure and a gemstone in the eternal character of New Mexico.

Ron Gardiner is a land- and water-use consultant. He established extensive wildlife and raptor surveys along the Rio Grande Gorge that received national recognition and awards. He lives in Questa.
Protection of our lands protects our way of life

By John Olivas
Thursday, June 25, 2009

As a guide/outfitter, sportsman, recreationalist, land-grant heir, and "norteño," I depend on the near-by wild and undeveloped public lands for the welfare of my business and my family's well-being here in Northern New Mexico. Having public land available to hunt, fish and hike on is the foundation of my livelihood. That's one reason I feel strongly about the need to protect the El Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area and Ute Mountain in Taos County.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman has recently introduced an important conservation measure to do just that, which will ensure that these lands will stay as they are, for the use and enjoyment of future New Mexicans. His proposal protects the use and rights of the traditional northern communities, which are very important to us.

I currently operate my business on five public land districts throughout New Mexico, and without this public land available, I would be forced to move out of the north and return to the city where jobs are more prevalent.

I did the city life for some years, and worked in the public and private sectors with minimal job satisfaction. Through my outfitting business I was able to move my family back home to rural Northern New Mexico where my business has flourished.

Because of the clean industry of outfitting, I am able to make a good living, and there is no better place than Northern New Mexico for keeping my family and raising my children.

I think of what I do as "living off the resource." Traditional people continue to live this type of lifestyle and the importance of land and water goes hand-in-hand with our work.

My resource is the wildlife that includes elk, mule deer, black bear and antelope to name a few that exists on these protected places. As residents and visitors come to experience hunting, fishing, hiking and camping here in Northern New Mexico, Bingaman's proposal will help guarantee that these resources can remain protected for future generations.

More and more people are recognizing that the opportunities ecotourism can bring into rural New Mexico are endless. This environmentally friendly industry can provide the chance to make a decent living in jobless areas in rural New Mexico, and remain on the land that their grandparents and great-grandparents called home.

More than nine in 10 people in this state hunt on public lands, and New Mexico's
hunters spend more than $150 million annually pursuing this sport. Our anglers contribute another $176 million to the state's bank account, and together with hunters support some 8,000 jobs. They help keep small businesses like mine thriving. That's why it wasn't surprising to me that several important local groups recently passed resolutions in support of the proposed conservation act. The Taos County Commission and the Chambers of Commerce of Mora Valley and Taos each went on record backing this bill last month.

Business leaders and local elected officials, more than most, understand the importance these lands play in our quality of life here and in protecting our livelihoods.

At an Economic Development Workshop in Questa recently, three of us shared our stories with community members about how we've been able to stay in rural New Mexico through our outfitting businesses. Children who grow up in these rural communities hunting, fishing and hiking the hills have the ability to turn what they know into a viable environmentally clean business. But our wild public land is critical to keeping these dreams and work alive.

I want my kids and theirs to have the opportunity to continue in this tradition if that is what they choose to do. That's why I hope Congress will act on Sen. Bingaman's El Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act soon. It will preserve grazing and traditional uses, recognize the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and protect the rights of our traditional communities for future generations. And ultimately, it will protect our way of life.

John Olivas owns and operates JACO Outfitters, LLC in Holman.
Conservation wave builds in the West

Silver City Sun-News (NM)
By Susan Montoya Bryan
Sunday, June 21, 2009

RIO GRANDE GORGE, N.M. - Craning his neck to see over the small airplane's instrument panel, Ron Gardiner points out the path Spanish explorers had to take around the deep crevasse that cuts through the center of northern New Mexico.

To the west of the famous Rio Grande gorge and its towering basalt cliffs is a broad plateau of sagebrush, native grass and remnants of the ancient volcanoes that helped form this rugged landscape. Herds of elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep and golden eagles call it home.

"This is one of the last undeveloped tracts in the Southwest," said Gardiner, a water policy consultant who is among those who have been spearheading the decades-old effort to protect the area.

The push to set aside nearly 370 square miles as the El Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area is part of a new wave of congressional proposals aimed at protecting more than 34 million acres of public land across the West.

However, as conservationists continue with their crusade, some people who make a living off the land are digging in to oppose the effort.

Critics are concerned that domestic energy production and traditions like ranching and firewood and pinon nut gathering will be limited as more tracts of public land are designated as conservation areas or wilderness.

Conservationists say they are trying to keep momentum going following the enactment last spring of a massive public lands bill that added more than 2 million acres to the nation's inventory of wilderness and other protected lands.

Other legislation has been introduced to designate areas in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming and Utah as wilderness and wild and scenic rivers.

"I'm aware of campaigns in just about every western state to designate new wilderness areas," said Paul Spitler, associate director of The Wilderness Society's national wilderness campaigns.

The El Rio Grande del Norte legislation - which has the backing of the Obama administration - would permit grazing, hunting and fishing and the gathering of firewood and pinon nuts. But no new roads would be allowed, and the land management agencies that oversee the area would not be able to lease or sell any parcels.

The legislation also would set aside two parcels within the conservation area as wilderness - one encompassing the 10,093-foot Ute Mountain and the other along the Rio San Antonio.

Some cattle ranchers are concerned the proposal would limit access to public land where they have grazed cattle for years. In wilderness, vehicles are not allowed.

"Taking care of improvements, developing water, having access to be able to maintain fences and other things sometimes become very difficult," said Gerald Chacon, a Rio Arriba County rancher and member of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association board of directors.
"What it essentially does is it's just sort of a way of squeezing you out of business," he said.

But Gardiner, sportsmen and other supporters argue that Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., worked hard to address the concerns of ranchers and local residents.

Greg McReynolds, a public lands coordinator for the nonprofit sportsmen group Trout Unlimited, doesn't consider the bill controversial.

"We're not trying to take anything away, we're not trying to change anything," he said. "We're just trying to protect it like it is."

The area is relatively untouched because of its rugged character, Gardiner said. The gorge and the lack of water on the plateau kept Spanish explorers and later pioneers from moving across the area.

"This has always been a land to circumvent," he said.

The area is an important winter range for elk, deer and antelope. It's also part of a migratory flyway and home to several pairs of eagles. One nest along the gorge north of the Taos bridge stands several feet tall and is about 20 years old.

The argument for protecting El Rio Grande del Norte is similar to the cases being made for the

"There is an intrinsic value to renewable recreation resources and this is a prime example of how a landscape provides for a community

Wild Rogue River in southern Oregon and millions of acres in Utah's red rock country. Conservation groups are also pursuing protection proposals for both.

Bob Gallagher, president of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, said some areas deserve to be protected. Still, he believes conservationists are making an effort to "grab more land and keep it out of bounds."

"If you're in a western state and you're not concerned about that, then you haven't been following what's going on," he said.

El Rio Grande del Norte is east of the San Juan Basin, one of the largest natural gas fields in the nation, and south of several exploratory wells in Colorado.

However, supporters of the proposed legislation said the threat is more about development along the gorge than drilling.

"People love the canyon and there are opportunities to build right up to the rim," Gardiner said.

Supporters also say the designation could be a tourist boon for the nearby communities of Questa, Taos and Red River. In 2007, more than 300,000 people visited the Rio Grande gorge and 33,000 paid New Mexico rafting outfitters for guided trips along the river.

and an economy and brings something really valuable to the state," McReynolds said.
Angler Wishes to Work with Ranchers
Friday, June 5, 2009

It's important to recognize that ranchers clearly have a vested interest in conservation and sustainability and many take their stewardship very seriously. As the Vice President of Enchanted Circle Trout Unlimited and owner/operator of Red River Anglers custom fly fishing guide service I want ranchers to understand that I want nothing more than to work hand in hand.

I have supported U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman's bill from the start. I am not interested in the negativity of environmental justice and zero grazing politics. I believe the land is there for everyone so every life style will not have to bear the brunt of toxic industry.

For us to progress we need to address these social justice issues of our past. Bridging the persistent gaps between environmental, social and economic concerns is the challenge my generation of thirty-something's now face.

I understand why ranchers feel resentment toward these outsiders (environmentalists) who are trying to dictate how they should care for the land. Their frustration that their own knowledge seems to be ignored is more than apparent.

Grazing public lands is a large part of the economic sustainability for the communities surrounding the areas outlined by the Rio Grande Del Norte bill. However, it is only one of many industries that rely on the tremendous economic engine that is the Rio Grande Gorge and the land that surrounds it.

The areas nominated for wilderness have long been somewhat de-facto wilderness and the new designation will not bring any significant changes. The development for the purpose of drilling stands to destroy the limited, valuable public grazing land. This bill is protection for everyone.

Sen. Bingaman's bill does provide protection to ensure traditional activities like cattle grazing, piñon gathering, hunting, fishing and firewood cutting will always be allowed.

Ranchers will always have access to their allotments. Hunting and fishing outfitters will always be able to sell their services to their clients. The local communities will always be able to collect firewood and piñon.

No one will be kicked off the land. It will remain protected so my children can always fish the Rio Grande Gorge and its tributaries.

Ranchers' children are ensured they can always continue their generational legacy of working the land their families have worked for a hundred or more years.

This bill simply shows that the area around the gorge is valuable, both socially and economically, as it stands.

Truly shouldn't it always remain that way for all the generations to come? Greg Scott / Red River
Bingaman's Bill Encourages Stewardship
Rio Grande Sun (NM)
Thursday, June 4, 2009

Editor:

Those of us who can trace our roots back to the dawn of New Mexico are lucky. We have inherited many of the lands and traditions that formed New Mexico.

We also inherited a responsibility to be stewards of our lands and to ensure that we pass healthy lands onto our children and grandchildren.

That sense of inherited responsibility is why we must support U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman's bill, the El Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act. Sen. Bingaman's bill will protect 236,000 acres around the Rio Grande Gorge from development of all kinds, while still protecting our traditional ways of life. The bill preserves grazing within the National Conservation Area and specifically protects our right to hunt, fish and collect piñon nuts and firewood within the Area. The legislation directs the Bureau of Land Management to protect the cultural, natural and scenic resources in the area, and to consult with the land grants community during the management planning process.

The land grant members also requested language to protect any rights granted under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This important bill will not affect water rights or private property, and would recognize existing rights of way for vehicle access and utilities.

Simply put, the El Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area will protect the area around the Gorge as it is, making sure that our descendents will come to know the Mesa as we know it. For these reasons, the land grant members after much discussion of this issue, decided to support the bill.

Socially and economically, supporting Sen. Bingaman's bill is the right thing to do. And it is more than that, it is our inherited responsibility.

Esther Garcia
President of San Antonio Del Rio Colorado
U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman introduces El Río Grande Del Norte national Conservation Area Establishment Act

The New Mexico Independent (NM)
By Matthew Reichbach
Friday, April 24, 2009

U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman introduced the El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act on Thursday, a bill which would designate more than 235,000 acres of land in northern New Mexico as a conservation area or wilderness. New Mexico's junior senator, Tom Udall, is a cosponsor of the bill.

"This bill would protect the valuable natural and cultural resources found in the area while also recognizing that the history of these lands is still being written by the local community," said Bingaman in a statement.

Under the bill, most of the land - 214,560 acres - would be maintained as a conservation area. But two other areas (the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta on the east-side and the 8,000-acre Río San Antonio in the west) would be managed as wilderness.

"I am pleased to be joining Senator Bingaman in introducing legislation to make these unique and historic landscapes in Taos and Rio Arriba counties available and accessible for the benefit of generations of New Mexicans to come," said Udall. Udall represented this area as a member of the House of Representatives before becoming a senator earlier this year.

The bill will be referred to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, the committee Bingaman chairs.
I write to strongly support your proposed legislation to create a new National conservation area in Taos County. Such a designated natural area of some 300,000 acres would greatly (and permanently) benefit the citizens of Taos County, New Mexico, and the Nation. It would also be of great benefit to the local and state economy, fueled as it is in considerable part by tourism.

My partner and I own 12 acres in Arroyo Hondo, land not included within the proposed boundaries of the conservation area but within walking distance of it. We can personally testify to the following traditional uses within the proposed designated area: Hiking, bicycling, and jeeping; swimming, fishing, and rafting on the Río Grande and its tributaries; birdwatching as well as plant and other nature study; study of rock art and other ancient American Indian remains, as well as visits to sacred sites by Pueblo and other contemporary native peoples; paid balloon rides; hunting; grazing of livestock; and simple viewing by tourists and residents of the great rugged natural beauty of an area containing such magnificent assets as the Río Grande River, Ute Mountain, and major herds of American elk and pronghorn.

This would not be an expensive matter. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) already administers a large part of the lands which would fall within the proposed area. The state of New Mexico has tentatively agreed to swap its own considerable holdings within the proposed area for BLM land elsewhere. It is crucially important to understand that existing private holdings within any such national conservation area would not be restricted by the designation, nor be subject to forced sale. One of the great advantages of such a designation would be the additional available funds (from already existing congressionally authorized monies) for BLM managers to further study the area's great natural assets and how best to manage them for conservation and for public use. Private in-holders could sell lands to the BLM from such funds if they choose to do so, but only by their choice. There would be no eminent domain forced-sales involved, nor any restrictions on the use of such private lands within the designated area.

I personally feel that this is perhaps the single most important conservation initiative we in Taos County are likely to see in our lifetimes. Such a national conservation area would permanently preserve a great part of this magnificent, largely open and undeveloped natural ecosystem, extending roughly from the Taos Junction Bridge in a widening wedge all the way to the Colorado border. While allowing traditional multi-purpose public uses, such a designation would go very far in protecting...
this 300,000-plus-acre area from such destructive, exploitative uses as drilling (and blasting) for oil and gas extraction, dumping of hazardous wastes, etc. A national conservation area here would largely ensure that both we and our descendants would continue to enjoy public access and use of a truly important and magnificent natural region.

P.S. Those who feel the same way could phone Sen. Bingaman's office stating their support at (202) 224-5521.

G. Frank Oatman Jr., of Arroyo Hondo, is a retired college professor, landscape designer, founder of a company operating natural history and cultural tours worldwide, and a lifelong conservationist.