



Rio Grande del Norte conservation area bill reaches U.S. House

By Matthew van Buren

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A number of representatives from Northern New Mexico were on their way to Washington, D.C., this week to speak in support of creating the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area.

A hearing, scheduled for 10 a.m. Thursday (March 29), related to a resolution introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, and co-sponsored by Rep. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, was to be heard before the House Natural Resource Committee's Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands. Heinrich sits on that subcommittee.

H.R. 1241 complements legislation sponsored by Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, and cosponsored by Sen. Tom Udall, DNM. The Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act has moved through the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and been placed on the Senate legislative calendar.

The federal legislation, if passed by both houses of Congress, would establish a 236,000-acre conservation area on public lands in Taos and Rio Arriba counties, a 13,420-acre "Cerro del Yuta Wilderness" in Taos County and an 8,000-acre "Rio San Antonio Wilderness" in Rio Arriba County.

The act introduced in the Senate makes note of the recreational uses of the area, as well as its historic uses and its importance as wildlife habitat.

"The plateau provides habitat for bighorn sheep, deer, elk and antelope, as well as several types of raptors that hunt throughout the area, including peregrine falcons, golden eagles and bald eagles," the act introduced in the Senate states. "The riparian area along the R'io Grande provides habitat for brown trout and the federally listed endangered southwestern willow flycatcher. The National Conservation Area also contains archaeological, cultural and historic resources relating to the settlement of the region by both indigenous populations and later by early Hispanic settlers."

Former magistrate judge and rancher Erminio Martinez was among those traveling to Washington, D.C., to speak on behalf of the creation of the Conservation Area. He said it is important to preserve and protect the area for future generations.

Martinez said the Rio Grande Gorge and surrounding area is not only a national treasure but is also important to local cultural traditions and history. "There is so much that needs to be preserved in this day and age," he said. Martinez said preserving traditional uses within the Conservation Area is also a key part of the legislation.

According to the House resolution being discussed, grazing would continue to be permitted in the area, as would the traditional collection of pi-òn nuts, firewood and medicinal plants and herbs “for noncommercial, personal use.” The resolution also calls for the protection of religious and cultural sites in the area to be preserved and for access to the sites by members of tribes or pueblos to be provided “for traditional cultural and customary uses.” Specific areas could also be temporarily closed “in order to protect traditional cultural and customary uses” by tribal members.

Local outfitter Stuart Wilde, who operates Wild Earth Llama Adventures, said creating the Conservation Area, besides preserving the “magnificence of the Rio Grande Gorge corridor,” the Conservation Area and wilderness designations themselves could attract more tourists to Taos County.

“I absolutely think it will bring new visitors to the Taos area,” he said. “We all benefit from those things.”

Wilde said he hopes legislators from both parties see the value in the Conservation Area and vote in favor of it.

“This is more than a 20-year effort,” he said. “We’re really hopeful that, locally, we’ve all done our groundwork ... (The legislation) really has strong backing from across the political spectrum.”

The federal Department of the Interior has also taken an interest in the proposed Conservation Area. Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Hayes visited Taos last fall to see the Gorge as he worked on a report that seeks to protect a number of unique areas throughout the country.

According to information from Luján’s office, Thursday’s hearing is the first step toward moving the bill through the House. After the hearing, it will be eligible for markup by the committee. If it is marked up, Luján intends to strengthen language that preserves grazing rights.

“The environmentally, culturally and historically rich landscapes of the San Lu’s Valley and Rio Grande Gorge that encompass the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area are part of New Mexico’s rich treasures,” Luján is quoted as saying in an email from his office. “Growing up in Nambé, I know the importance of access to the land — those of us with deep roots here appreciate that the protection of these landscapes under the proposed bill preserves grazing within the National Conservation Area and specifically protects our right to hunt, fish and collect pi-òn nuts and firewood.”

According to information from Bingaman’s office, he is hopeful the bill will make it to the president’s desk this year. Bingaman is not running for re-election in 2012.

“The R’o Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act received bipartisan support in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and is ready to be considered by the full Senate,” he is quoted as saying in an email to *The Taos News*. “I am glad the House of Representatives is working on this important bill that will protect this impressive landscape while attracting more tourists to visit Northern New Mexico.”