



## Supporters optimistic about Conservation Area bill

By Matthew van Buren

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Following a trip to Washington, D.C., last week, advocates of the creation of the R'ó 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 R'ó 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, DNM, 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 R'ó 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 R'ó 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 Garc'a 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.

Garc'a spoke to the importance of protecting the land and water, acknowledging the R'o Grande del Norte's role as critical wildlife habitat as well as the region's "long human history."

Former magistrate judge and rancher Erminio Mart'nez 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."

Mart'nez said, after attending the subcommittee hearing and meeting with New Mexico's Congressional Delegation, he feels confident that the R'o 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.

Garc'a 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."

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