



## **Sens. seek Rio Grande monument status**

**By Matthew van Buren**

*The Taos News*, 11/1/2012

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 Rio 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 Dona 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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Rio Grande del Norte legislation.

Trout Unlimited’s Garrett VeneKlasen said the Rio 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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Rios 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 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.”

Outfitter Stuart Wilde, with Wild Earth Llama Adventures, said he supports efforts to protect the Rio 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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Rio 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'

Rio 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 Rio Grande del Norte.

The resolution notes the "scenic, environmental, economic, cultural and recreational value to Taos and Rio 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 Do-a 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 Do-a 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.