

## Interior Secretary urged to protect Rio Grande del Norte

By J.R. Logan

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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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Taosenos 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 Garcia spoke about the need to safeguard the land while respecting the historic activities of longtime Hispano residents. "For me, protecting El Rio Grande del Norte is very important, but I also want to protect the traditional uses of land," Garcia 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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Rio 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 Lu's 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 Rio 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, though 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.

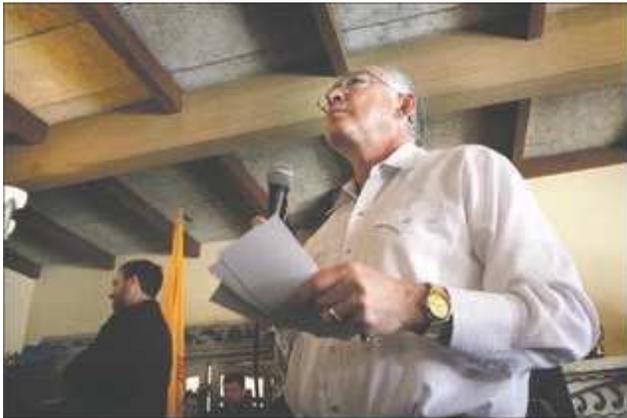
It's not known whether a presidential proclamation would include the same language, though, based on Saturday's hearing, many of the comments Salazar will now take to the president include similar stipulations.



**Tony Huston attended the meeting with his falcon.**

Rick Romancito

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**U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar listens to a crowd of supporters for the establishment of a Rio Grande Del Norte National Monument Saturday (Dec. 15) at the Kachina Lodge in Taos.**

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