

Utah rep. opposes Rio Grande del Norte monument

By Matthew van Buren

The Taos News, 12/27/2012

Following Department of the Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's visit to Taos Dec. 15 to discuss protecting the Rio 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 Rio Grande Gorge, Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain in Taos and Rio 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 Rio 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, pi-on and herbs, religious and cultural sites — it would all be protected. Designating Rio 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 Rios 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.”