

## Rio Grande del Norte legislation refiled

By Matthew van Buren

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Federal legislation to create the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area has been reintroduced after efforts to protect the area through Congressional and presidential action failed last year.

According to a news release from New Mexico's Congressional Delegation, Sens. Tom Udall, D-NM, and Martin Heinrich, D-NM, and Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, D-NM, introduced legislation in the U.S. House and Senate to permanently protect the 240,000-acre area in Taos and Rio Arriba counties.

Former Sen. Jeff Bingaman led the effort to create the Conservation Area for several years before retiring at the end of 2012.

He and others called for President Obama to create a National Monument to protect the area after legislation stalled last year.

"Some of Northern New Mexico's most historically and culturally rich treasures can be found in these areas," Udall is quoted as saying in the release. "The residents of Taos and Rio Arriba counties have joined us in an effort to protect their incredible landscapes and ensure the lands remain accessible for the benefit of locals and visitors. I was proud to take up this initiative with Jeff Bingaman and we will work to see that the preservation of the Rio Grande del Norte is part of his lasting legacy."

The land is currently under the purview of the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The text of the newly introduced legislation was not available from the Library of Congress prior to publication. However, previous bills called for the establishment of wilderness areas around Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain, and the creation of a National Conservation Area along the Rio Grande Gorge.

Legislation has also called for traditional land uses, such as grazing, to be allowed to continue, garnering support from ranchers, land grant heirs and other groups.

Proponents of the move frequently tout the public's "overwhelming support," according to the delegation's release, listing among its backers the Taos County Commission, village of Questa, Taos County Chamber of Commerce, area businesses and others.

Protecting this land should be a top priority, and Secretary Salazar's visit to Taos in December of last year reinforced that there is overwhelming support by the local community to do so," Luján is quoted as saying.

A joint release from the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers praises the action.

"Our congressional leaders' commitment to sportsmen and Northern New Mexico is without question," Max Trujillo, sportsman organizer for the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, is quoted as saying. "This proposal has overwhelming local support but unfortunately has been tied up in a Congress that had no interest in protecting public lands."

Garrett VeneKlasen, director of the Southwest Region of Trout Unlimited, also said protecting the Rio Grande del Norte area is a top priority.

"We support this legislation, and our representatives introduced it because it is the result of years of work by local stakeholders," he is quoted as saying in the release. "We are pleased to see a strong show of support from New Mexico's congressional delegation and eagerly await action. We as a diverse community have come together, we've done our homework, and have come up with a plan to keep this hunting and fishing paradise as it is now."

Udall and Heinrich have also reintroduced legislation to make the Valles Caldera National Preserve a National Park.

For more information about the Rio Grande del Norte, visit [www.riograndedelnorte.org](http://www.riograndedelnorte.org) .