

Commissioner backs Rio Grande del Norte

By Matthew van Buren

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New Mexico State Land Commissioner Ray Powell has reiterated his support for monument designation for the Rio Grande del Norte area.

The 236,000-acre area in Taos and Rio Arriba counties has been the focus of a number of federal efforts seeking to lend it permanent protection. Former U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, introduced a bill last year to create a National Conservation Area around the Rio Grande Corridor, including more than 21,000 acres of wilderness around Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain.

However, Bingaman's legislation stalled in Congress. Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, and Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, reintroduced similar legislation this year in the Senate and House. However, during a visit to Taos Feb. 16, cosponsor Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, said "gridlock" in Washington, D.C., is the biggest enemy of legislative efforts to protect the Rio Grande del Norte.

In light of such "gridlock," New Mexico's Congressional delegates and others have also appealed to President Obama to use his powers under the Antiquities Act to establish a National Monument around the Rio Grande del Norte area. During his visit last month, Heinrich said he met with Obama about the idea earlier this year and came away from the meeting "very positive and optimistic."

According to a Tuesday (March 12) release from Powell's office, the boundaries of the proposed monument include about 45,000 acres of State Trust Land, and the State Land Office is working with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to "identify lands suitable for exchange." "This is an excellent example of a collaborative effort between the local community, the New Mexico State Land Office, our New Mexico Congressional team and our federal partners, the BLM and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," Powell is quoted as saying in the release.