

Rio Grande del Norte: Monumental feat

Obama OKs status as Taosenos celebrate

By Matthew van Buren

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The celebrations in Taos began with last week's announcement that President Obama would create the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, and they are likely to continue for weeks to come.

The president signed a proclamation Monday morning (March 25) declaring the Rio Grande del Norte, in Taos and Rio Arriba counties, a 242,555-acre National Monument. At a standing-room-only gathering at the Taos County Commission chambers Monday, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, described the signing as the culmination of years of work and collaboration to preserve the Rio Grande Gorge and surrounding area for future generations.

Monday's event followed a hastily organized but similarly well-attended celebration hosted by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance March 23, and it preceded another visit to Taos by outgoing Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, planned Saturday (March 30), 11 a.m. at Taos Mesa Brewing — which named a beer after the Rio Grande del Norte to commemorate the national monument designation. Supporters have touted the Rio Grande del Norte's physical features, traditional uses, recreational opportunities, cultural and historical resources, and economic development potential

"This is a really wonderful occasion," Udall said to those gathered in the commission chambers Monday.

He acknowledged retired U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman's hard work on the Rio Grande del Norte. Since 2007, Bingaman had worked unsuccessfully to create a Conservation Area, including two wildernesses, around the Rio Grande del Norte, but Udall credited the work of Bingaman, his staff and an "incredible local coalition" with the successful creation of the new national monument.

"This is part of Sen. Bingaman's legacy," Udall said.

The effort to create the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area goes back more than 20 years, however; then-U.S. Rep. Bill Richardson introduced legislation to protect a 394,200-acre area in 1991.

Udall spoke to the wide-ranging coalition of monument supporters, including community leaders, local governments, land grant heirs, sportsmen, environmentalists, guides and outfitters, saying building local consensus is key to moving such measures forward. He said the grassroots support for protecting the Rio Grande del Norte is “remarkable.”

“The diversity struck me,” he said. “Everybody united.”

Proclamation

The president is authorized to create national monuments under the 1906 Antiquities Act. The proclamation creating the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, modeled after the New Mexico Congressional Delegation’s legislative efforts to protect the area, recognizes its unique resources, including scientific, historic and ecological features. It discusses the imprints of 10,000 years of human passage through the area, including petroglyphs, potsherds, tools and other archaeological resources, as well as the Rio Grande del Norte’s geologic history and biological diversity.

The proclamation describes the “sweeping and austere expanse of the Taos Plateau,” extinct volcanoes including Ute Mountain, San Antonio Mountain and Cerro de la Olla, and the landscape as a “testament to the geologic past of New Mexico and the 70-million-year tectonic history of the Rio Grande Rift.” The monument also includes the Rio Grande Gorge, designated as a Wild and Scenic River in 1968.

“The protection of the Rio Grande del Norte will preserve its cultural, prehistoric and historic legacy and maintain its diverse array of natural and scientific resources, ensuring that the historic and scientific values of this area remain for the benefit of all Americans,” the proclamation states.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), under the Secretary of the Interior, will continue to manage the area. According to the proclamation, “laws, regulations and policies followed by the BLM in issuing and administering grazing permits or leases on lands under its jurisdiction shall continue to apply with regard to the lands in the monument,” and the “traditional collection of firewood and pi-on nuts in the monument for personal, noncommercial use” will continue.

According to the proclamation, nothing in it “shall be construed to alter or affect the Rio Grande Compact between the states of Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, or to create any reservation of water in the monument.” However, Los Rios River Runners owner Cisco Guevara told those gathered at Monday’s event he hopes monument status could be a “giant step forward” in seeing Northern New Mexico river levels rise in the future. He complained that Colorado irrigators are taking too much water and said it could be a “huge boost” to the economy here if the Rio Grande crossed the border as more than “single-digit trickles.”

Los Rios River Runners owner Cisco Guevara said there were hopes for more water with the Wild and Scenic designation, but that people are more educated and sophisticated now. He said he hopes the issue will be revisited because of the “renewed focus” on the Rio Grande del Norte.

Rio Grande del Norte was among five new national monuments created Monday. The others were the Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument in Ohio, the First State National Monument in Delaware, the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument in Maryland and the San Juan Islands National Monument in Washington.

New Mexico now has 13 national monuments. Others include Prehistoric Trackways and the Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks, managed by the BLM, the Salinas Pueblo Missions, White Sands, the Aztec Ruins within Chaco Canyon, the Gila Cliff Dwellings, El Malpais, El Morro, Fort Union, Petroglyph, Bandelier, and Capulin Volcano, all managed by the National Park Service.

Oval office

U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, cosponsored legislation this year to create the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area and attended Monday's signing ceremony in the Oval Office.

In an interview following the signing, Heinrich told *The Taos News* he would rather see most of these types of proposals move through the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and be approved in a legislative fashion. He expressed hope that Congress can get back to the point where delegations are doing most of the work, though he said he is "very grateful" to President Obama for signing the national monument proclamation. "I'm just very excited that it happened," he said. Heinrich said he has explored the Rio Grande Gorge extensively and has a personal understanding of the area's significance.

"It's an iconic landscape," he said.

U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, DNM, introduced accompanying legislation for the National Conservation Area in the House. "Whether it's for recreation or ranching, sustaining a way of life or finding inspiration, the Rio Grande del Norte leaves a lasting impression on all those who visit and all those who live off the sustenance it provides," Luján said in a prepared statement.

Among those who traveled from New Mexico to Washington, D.C., for the signing ceremony were Taos Pueblo War Chief Samuel Gomez and Questa Mayor Esther Garcia.

"It was very exciting," Garcia said of meeting the President and visiting the White House for the first time.

Garcia testified before the U.S. House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands March 29, 2012, urging its members to support the establishment of the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area. She said as an elected official she understood the need to balance competing interests, and that the "vast majority of Northern New Mexicans" support safeguarding these "special lands." She said the proposed legislation was the "product of years of meetings and discussions amongst those most affected."

"I can assure you that support for this legislation is broad, deep and strong," her testimony reads.

Reached Tuesday (March 26), Garcia spoke to the hard work on behalf of the Rio Grande del Norte done by a broad group of interests, and she said she felt a sense of satisfaction. "It was quite an event and quite exciting for me personally," she said. "It is a very good feeling, especially when I saw him signing it."

Monument's future

BLM field manager Sam Des Georges said his office staff will begin meeting to discuss the monument's future before engaging state and federal offices. He said the BLM has been managing monuments for a while.

"There are some lessons there that we'll be able to learn from," he said.

Des Georges said over the next three years, the BLM will be engaging with local business leaders and community members to discuss "what the future will look like."

"Those answers are yet to come," he said.

Conservationist Ron Gardiner said he feels a sense of relief now that the monument status is in place. He said he spent some of the best years of his life in the Rio Grande Gorge documenting wildlife and enjoying the unique landscape.

Gardiner said biodiversity is diminishing in America, and finding animals from golden eagles to antelope and trout in a place like the Rio Grande del Norte speaks to how special the place is. "I think it's just outstanding," he said.

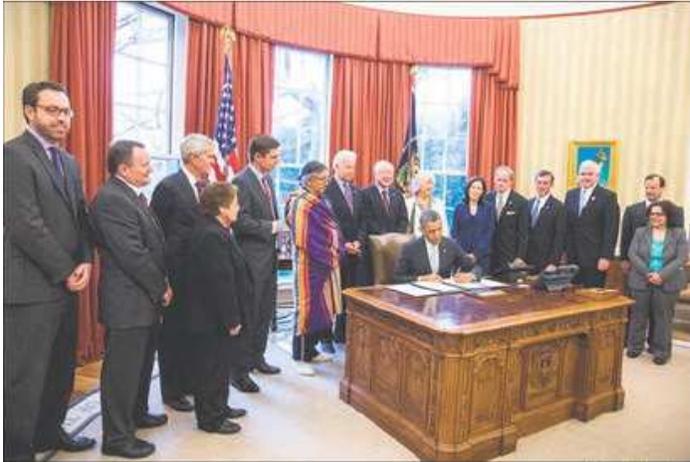
Richard Speegle said he worked for the BLM from the late '70s through 1994 and was in the first group of BLM workers that moved up to Taos from the agency's office in Albuquerque. "I had the first position that managed recreation in '77," he said.

Speegle said in those early days of the Wild and Scenic River designation, the BLM was still focused on minerals, grazing and other activities, and it was only beginning to recognize the importance of recreation. He said the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act in 1976 finally made the BLM recognize multiple uses, including archaeology, wildlife and recreation — which has since become an integral part of its mission in the West.

Speegle said in 30 years, it has been interesting to see recreation go from an afterthought to "the major management activity."

"That's what's going on in the West," he said.

He said the national monument designation adds "one more piece of the puzzle" in protecting the entire northern area of the Rio Grande. He said "you never know" when development will threaten a special area like the Rio Grande del Norte, and the monument status gives it an "added layer" of protection. "I'm glad they carried it forward," Speegle said. "It's about time."



Official White House Photo

Retired U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman and U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich join President Barack Obama, flanked by Vice President Joe Biden and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, at a National Monument Proclamations signing ceremony in the Oval Office to establish the Rio Grande del Norte as a U.S. National Monument Monday (March 25). Taos Pueblo War Chief Samuel Gomez and Questa Mayor Esther Garcia are also in attendance.



Tina Larkin

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall thanks a Taoseno for his efforts in creating the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument during a celebration held Monday (March 25) at the Taos County Commissions Chambers.