

Monument expected to boost local economy

By Matthew van Buren

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Those gathered at the Taos County Commission chambers Monday (March 25) heard the Taos region is already experiencing economic benefits from the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

President Obama signed a proclamation designating the 242,555-acre monument Monday, and an event featuring U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, drew a sizable crowd over the noon hour. Among the benefits of the designation is the money that is expected to follow it, with additional revenues expected for everyone from river guides to restaurateurs.

Los Rios River Runners owner Cisco Guevara addressed Monday's crowd, saying his company and others are already hiring extra staff and investing in additional infrastructure in anticipation of more visitors. Each new tourist dollar will be "multiplied many times" as visitors stay in local hotels, eat at restaurants, buy art and "visit the emergency rooms," Guevara said to hearty laughter from the audience.

"It's so overwhelmingly inspirational to see it finally coming through," he said.

An August 2012 report on the economic impacts of national monument designation by BBC Research and Consulting attempts to quantify the potential benefits to the region, including both Taos and Rio Arriba counties.

According to the report, the Rio Grande del Norte had a total impact of about \$17.2 million per year before the monument designation, and that amount is expected to nearly double, to \$32.2 million. The number of jobs supported is also expected to come close to doubling, increasing from 312 to 591. Those estimates take into account activities, gasoline, groceries, restaurants, lodging, retail and other expenses.

"Once baseline visitation and economic and fiscal benefits were established, BBC modeled the additional benefit of national monument designation by projecting increases in expected visitation and associated visitor spending," the report states. "Post-designation visitation estimates were based on visitation growth at other national monuments."

BBC estimated about 325,000 annual visits to the Rio Grande del Norte, with 19 percent of that total estimated to be non-local day users, 10 percent visitors who stay in hotels and 7 percent who camp. The report estimates visitation will increase to about 488,000 annual visits. It also breaks down estimated spending by activity, including biking, boating, camping, climbing, fishing, hunting and others, and estimates an additional \$1.8 million in state and local tax revenue will be collected under the new designation.

U. S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, DNM, was present for Monday is signing ceremony at the White House. Afterward he told *The Taos News* that as an outfitter and guide in Northern New Mexico he saw first hand the economic impact the Rio Grande del Norte has on the region. He said the national monument status has the potential to bring millions in additional revenue to the area, as well as protecting and preserving the unique heritage and landscape of Taos County.

Jamie Tedesco, representing the New Mexico Green Chamber of Commerce and Taos Tourism Council, told the group in the commission chambers that the national monument designation demonstrates the importance of public/private partnerships to get things done.

“When we all work together, we win,” he said.

A release from the New Mexico Green Chamber emphasizes the importance of the designation, with Tedesco referring to it as a “vital component to our local economy.”

“The protected public lands across New Mexico, including Rio Grande del Norte, support jobs and attract visitors and new businesses to our state,” he is quoted as saying. “The President’s designation will only improve the long-term economic prospects for this area.”

Guevara is quoted in the Green Chamber announcement as saying national monuments achieve higher status in guidebooks and travel blogs, thereby encouraging visitors to stay longer. In another email, Tedesco wrote that guides like Guevara and Stuart Wilde, of Wilde Earth Llama Adventures, draw visitors, generate tax revenues and create jobs thanks to areas like the Rio Grande del Norte. Mountain Skills Rock Climbing also operates in the Rio Grande del Norte, and owner Jay Foley’s book, “Taos Rock,” highlights climbs along the Rio Grande Corridor, including in the Pilar area, near the John Dunn Bridge, and in the Wild and Scenic area.

Taos County Chamber of Commerce Board Chairman Brad Malone also issued a statement in favor of the designation.

“Stewardship of the land is built into all that we do, and the business community considers preservation to be just another part of good business,” he is quoted as saying.

A release from Trout Unlimited praises the action, describing this section of the Rio Grande as “arguably New Mexico’s most iconic and expansive wild trout fishery” and speaking to the money the Rio Grande del Norte attracts from hunters and anglers.

Quoting Taos Fly Shop owner Nick Streit, the release states: “The national monument designation of Rio Grande del Norte will ensure that local business owners like myself — who rely on the long-term health and viability of our public lands and watersheds — will have access to quality resources we can count on to sustain our economic endeavors.”



Tina Larkin

Los Rios River Runners owner Cisco Guevara talks on camera about the benefits the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument will bring after Monday's (March 25) celebration at the Taos County Commissions Chambers.



Tina Larkin

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall thanks Taosenos for their efforts over the years toward the creation of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument at a Monday (March 25) celebration in the Taos County Commissions Chambers.