

Editorial

Rio Grande del Norte National Monument: Unity brings great results

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Establishment of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is a done deal, after President Barack Obama made it official Monday (March 25).

Now, our big backyard — 242,555 acres that include the Rio Grande Gorge, and the Ute and San Antonio mountains in Taos and Rio Arriba counties — will be forever preserved. This is indeed welcome news. We give a great deal of credit to Jeff Bingaman, who served New Mexico as U.S. senator for three decades until he retired last year. Since 2007, he championed this cause. The national monument designation for the Rio Grande del Norte will be part of his legacy.

Of course, Bingaman didn't do it alone. U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, and Rep. Ben Ray Luján, as well as out-going U.S. Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar, also worked on behalf of the Rio Grande del Norte at the national level.

But it was the strong local support, we believe, that helped this proposal carry weight. It is indeed rare to see such unity among local government officials, tribal leaders, environmentalists, sportsmen, business owners, ranchers, and land grant heirs.

Why not? The so-called Rio Grande del Norte has long been used for such traditional activities as grazing, hunting, fishing and gathering pi-òn and firewood. The area also contains many religious and cultural sites. With this designation, it will continue that way, unthreatened by further development.

And, as demonstrated by the excitement expressed openly in recent days, the national monument designation is expected to give a boost to local businesses when more outsiders come to see what is so special about this spot.

Rio Grande del Norte is one of five new national monuments, including the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington State and a Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad site in Maryland. We are certain the people living near those sites also place a great deal of value on them.

We give praise for a job well done, but alas, it is incomplete until the 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo area north of Taos is fully protected. Like the Rio Grande del Norte, preservation efforts fell short last year in the deeply divided Congress.

We urge the same leaders and groups to continue pressing for a Columbine-Hondo Wilderness. With the unity they demonstrated for the Rio Grande, we are hopeful they can convince those at the national level the wilderness of Northern New Mexico is worth preserving.