

Federal, local advocates fete Rio Grande del Norte

By Matthew van Buren

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Hundreds of supporters packed Taos Mesa Brewing on a sunny Saturday (March 30) for a visit from federal dignitaries to celebrate the new Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Outgoing Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, retired U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, Sen. Martin Heinrich, DNM, and Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, were among those in attendance, and they were joined by a celebratory crowd that included conservationists, government leaders and business representatives.

The event, which featured food, music and speeches, was held to commemorate the March 25 signing of a presidential proclamation creating the 242,555-acre Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Addressing the standing- room-only crowd, Bingaman, who introduced legislation to create a national conservation area around the Rio Grande del Norte, thanked the people of Taos County and Northern New Mexico, saying without their enthusiastic support the monument designation would not have happened. He also suggested the day be recognized as “Ken Salazar Appreciation Day” for the secretary’s efforts. “He has done a tremendous amount for this state,” Bingaman said as the audience stood and applauded for Salazar.

Heinrich said the Rio Grande del Norte provides a “textbook example” of what can be accomplished with broad, effective community support. He said the monument designation can serve as a lesson to other communities throughout the country.

“This is a special place,” he said.

Salazar, who will leave his post in the coming weeks, said the Rio Grande del Norte is his proudest accomplishment in four years as Secretary of the Interior. He talked about the importance of protecting the area in perpetuity, describing the idea of giving common people access to significant lands “radically American and uniquely democratic.”

Salazar said as a conservation agenda was being framed, he and others were looking not only at natural features, or cultural or historical significance, but at jobs and economic development. He said 6-9 million jobs per year are created through outdoor recreation, and a 2012 report by BBC Research and Consulting estimated the monument designation could mean \$15 million annually and 279 additional jobs for the region.

“This is an economic engine,” Salazar said.

New Mexico Green Chamber of Commerce board president Lawrence Rael also referred to the enormous economic development potential of the monument designation.

“It’s also a good business decision,” he said. “It’s the right business decision.”

Stuart Wilde, of Wild Earth Llama Adventures, was guiding a group in the new monument during Saturday’s event, but he prepared a statement for the occasion in which he praised the protection of public lands as a way to promote sustainable economic development.

“As you know, conservation legislation not only benefits outfitters and guides like me, but also benefits the entire business community, as tourism dollars are spent at our lodging establishments, restaurants and local merchants,” he wrote, later adding, “The real story of our new national monument is how our diverse rural community came together, across the cultural and political spectrum, to protect the Rio Grande del Norte, and in the process has redefined conservation in the West.”

Rael described New Mexico’s Congressional delegation as “tremendous advocates” for the area. Salazar also spoke to the hard work of New Mexico’s “outstanding delegation” in Washington, D.C., with Salazar’s mention of Bingaman’s name eliciting a standing ovation from the crowd.

Salazar said representatives like Bingaman are able to bring people together, adding that his love of the state and decades spent problem solving on behalf of his constituents “forever make him part of the landscape of New Mexico.”



Tina Larkin

U.S. Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar speaks at the Saturday (March 30) celebration for the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument at Taos Mesa Brewing that was attended by hundreds.



Tina Larkin

Retired U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, left, Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, and Taos Pueblo Lt. War Chief Matthew Montoya clap for a speaker.



Tina Larkin

Retired U.S. senator Jeff Bingaman autographs a poster for Ron Gardiner, of the Land and Water Clinic, right, at a celebration for the new Rio Grande del Norte National Monument held Saturday (March 30) at Taos Mesa Brewing.