

## **Business owners: Optimism, uncertainty in Rio Grande Del Norte National Monument**

**By Andrew Oxford**

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With the creation of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, local anglers and outfitters are calculating how the area's new status will impact their businesses.

"This is a great model for sustainable economic development," said Stuart Wilde of Wild Earth Llama Adventures and an early proponent. Monument status, Wilde said, will balance conservation with the growth of the tourism industry.

"Our phone has been ringing off the hook," Wilde said as he drove out to a trailhead in the newly designated national monument.

Community leaders have touted the tourist-related revenue Northern New Mexico stands to gain from the creation of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. The designation, however, is only the beginning of a planning process that will include changes to the area's administration and infrastructure. Many details regarding governance, law enforcement and policy remain unclear.

Wayne Thurber, owner of Dos Amigos Anglers, said he was curious about who is in charge of the next steps and how regulation may change in the coming years. "I'm not really clear on what the impact could be," Thurber said.

Many local guides already work with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the federal agency that manages the monument; Thurber said that relationship is unlikely to change. More communication between stakeholders, the guide suggested, could help locals doing business in the Rio Grande del Norte plan for any changes in policy. "Once I have a better grasp of the facts, I will have a better idea of how it will affect what I do," Thurber said. "Maybe it won't."

The cooperation among businesses that helped drive the campaign to establish the monument should continue, Wilde added, as the BLM moves ahead. The legislation establishing the monument, Wilde said, set a precedent for local inclusion in the crafting of similar designations. Provisions in the law ensure continued access to the monument for traditional uses of the land, such as pi-on gathering and fishing.

"I would hope it does not get gobbled up by big government interests," Van Beacham, proprietor of the Solitary Angler, said. Balancing the interests of tourists and guides with BLM's plans will be crucial as the process moves forward, he added.

The BLM's course remains uncertain, however. There have been no plans for new infrastructure such as a visitor center or ranger station. No new roads or trails have been charted. While such investments would portend a tangible economic impact, the hands-off approach is somewhat intentional, according to local guides.

"It's not being managed as a normal national monument," Beacham said. An extra ranger station might be appropriate, the angler remarked. "I hope we don't go much beyond that."

Substantial federal investment appears unlikely, according to previous economic analyses. An August 2012 study by BBC Research and Consulting stated that "there is no current commitment to additional Federal funding for operations or capital projects in the monument designation proposal."

As plans for infrastructure development remain unsettled, tourism will remain the major driver of economic activity in the Rio Grande del Norte. The BBC study projected national monument designation would nearly double spending on lodging, restaurants and activities in the area from a combined \$8,406,114 to \$16,287,709.

The BBC study also suggested that growth in visitor traffic is not guaranteed. "Despite the compelling visitation growth shown in the benchmark analysis," the study's authors reported, "Rio Grande del Norte is somewhat limited in potential growth post-designation."

Area residents are expected to compose the majority of visitors to the monument.

The new designation's muted effect on business suits some anglers. "I don't think it will impact the way we do business," said Jack Wooley, a guide at the Solitary Angler. "I don't think it was intended to."