

Land buy to provide access to monument

By Matthew van Buren

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The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is developing new routes into the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument after procuring an adjacent acreage.

According to information from the Trust for Public Land, that organization bought 78 acres at the end of County Road 110 from the First National Bank of New Mexico and sold it to the BLM.

"We are thrilled with this latest acquisition, which adds a key parcel to one of our most cherished landscapes, the 'Taos Valley Overlook,'" New Mexico State BLM Director Jesse Juen is quoted as saying in an announcement from the Trust. "The parcel will also provide the public a future trailhead and wonderful access into a portion of the newly designated (National Monument)."

President Obama used his powers under the Antiquities Act to designate the 242,555-acre monument in March, after legislative efforts to create the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area stalled in Congress. Federal attempts to create wilderness areas around the Rio San Antonio and Ute Mountain continue.

"This is a good fit with our mission of protecting land for people, because it ensures that visitors will be able to more easily enter the southern end of this spectacular gorge," Greg Hiner, with the Trust for Public Land, is quoted as saying.

According to the Trust announcement, the 78-acre parcel cost \$780,000. The money came from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is funded through fees paid by offshore drilling companies.

According to a BLM report on new trail segments, approximately 17 miles of new trails have been developed over the past dozen years within the Rio Grande Gorge area.

"The purpose of this action is to develop new trail segments that would create both longer and shorter loops as well as increase trail use opportunities," the report states.

BLM Taos Field Director Sam DesGeorges said people have been using the property at the end of County Road 110 to access the "Slide Trail," created two decades ago when a rock slide closed Old 570. However, he said hikers who accessed the trail using the upper part of County Road 110 as a "de facto trailhead" have been doing so in trespass.

"That piece of land was always private," he said.

DesGeorges said the BLM plans to develop the property as a trailhead, but to “make it more orderly,” including defining the parking area and confining motorized use to the upper part of the trail rather than allowing haphazard uses to continue.

The BLM report notes a “demonstrated demand for public access at the end of County Road 110” and states acquiring the property would result in “positive effects of increased management,” including controlling vehicle use and trash dumping.

“The addition of a formal trailhead at the end of County Road 110 would probably not create much more recreation use than what already occurs,” the report states. “However, there may be a slight increase in use or a change in the type of user due to an increase in management presence.”

The report does note “potential Special Recreation Use permit applicants” who have approached the BLM regarding “hosting competitive and endurance events in the area.”

DesGeorges said falcons that nest in the area have been doing so even with the current level of human activity, and he does not anticipate a large increase in use following the acquisition of the 78-acre property. He said the report notes the potential for someone to want to host an event, but the BLM would first have to make sure it wouldn’t impact resources in the area or the local community.

“(Such a proposal) would require a full analysis,” he said.

The proclamation creating the National Monument mentions traditional uses of the Rio Grande del Norte and notes the wildlife and archaeological resources that can be found in the area.

DesGeorges said under the Antiquities Act, the president is charged with focusing on the smallest acreage that protects cultural, natural and scientific objects of value. He said those objects are the “screen against which everything is measured,” and the trick for the BLM is to protect them in a way that allows for human activity on the same landscape.

“It’s a balancing act between the objects and the human uses,” he said.

New Mexico’s Congressional Delegation praised the land acquisition and the BLM’s plans, with Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, and Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, D-NM, both saying it is a reminder of the important role the Land and Water Conservation Fund plays.

“Increasing access to the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument will improve the quality of life for all who hunt, fish and float there, for all who benefit from the tourism dollars it brings, and for all who pass on New Mexico’s many outdoor traditions — both old and new — to their children in such a magnificent setting,” Heinrich is quoted as saying in the Trust announcement.

For more information about the Trust for Public Land, visit www.tpl.org.