



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## BLM wants advice on Rio Grande del Norte

By J.R. Logan

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In the push to establish the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument last year, a diverse coalition of business leaders, environmentalists, artists, outdoorsmen and community groups banded together to fight for the protection of about 250,000 acres of public lands in Northern New Mexico.

Now that the dust has settled, those same groups will have to come to the table to hash out the details of what uses should and should not be allowed in the monument. Given the varying reasons each group fought for monument status, the discussion may elicit debate among the members of the coalition that pushed for protection.

The Taos office of the Bureau of Land Management is soliciting public comment for a plan that will dictate exactly how the monument will operate.

"It's less of a dream and more of what is actually going to happen," said Sam DesGeorges, field manager of BLM's Taos office.

A series of public meetings are planned in the coming weeks to gather input on what the monument plan should include. The meetings are a prelude to the actual development of the plan.

"This is our invitation to the public to tell us about what they value within the monument," DesGeorges said.

The primary goal of the process is to find a way to balance all of interests that fought for the protection and who use the monument. While many priorities may be shared, others may not.

For example, should the BLM do a better job of marking roads, trails and sites in the monument? Or should it keep the area unmarked to preserve the unique feeling of being in the middle of nowhere?

The planning process will also put meat behind uses that were specifically allowed under the monument proclamation. For instance, the monument effort won the support of land grant activists and local Hispanos because it promised to protect traditional uses such as wood gathering and herb collection. But those protections aren't unlimited. Motorized access to reach wood cutting areas could be limited to protect valuable natural resources.

Finding that middle ground is key to creating a management plan, DesGeorges said.

The proclamation did take some uses off the table entirely. Mining, for instance, is specifically banned.

Utility easements, however, are not dismissed outright, and that could be a big point of contention as the monument plan is drafted.

Shortly after the monument was created, wholesale power supplier Tri-State Generation and Transmission announced it was looking at possibly running a high-capacity transmission line across from the San Lu's Valley in Colorado to an area just west of Taos. One of the proposed routes would cross the monument, drawing sharp criticism from many who worked to have the area protected and who have vowed to stop the transmission line.

DesGeorges said it would likely take a couple of years for the final plan to be adopted. In the meantime, he said he's relying on the existing land use plan (unveiled in 2012) combined with the language in the proclamation to decide if uses are appropriate.

Regardless of what the final plan looks like, it's unclear if there will be additional funds available for things like new visitor centers or campgrounds in the monument.

Federal budget cuts under the "sequester" mean there may be no budget for new infrastructure or staff.

The Bureau of Land Management has scheduled a series of public meetings in the region to ask for comment on a draft land use plan for the R'o Grande del Norte National Monument. Dates include:

Jan. 28 — Sagebrush Inn, 1508 Paseo del Pueblo Sur, Taos

Jan. 29 — Village Hall, 2500 Old State Road 3, Questa

Jan. 30 — American Legion Hall, 701 Main Street (U.S. 285), Antonito, Colo.

Feb. 4 — BLM New Mexico State Office, 301 Dinosaur Trail, Santa Fe

For more information call the Taos BLM Office at (575) 758-8851 or visit [blm.gov/nm/riograndedelnorte](http://blm.gov/nm/riograndedelnorte) . Comments can be submitted to [blm\\_nm\\_taos\\_comments@blm.gov](mailto:blm_nm_taos_comments@blm.gov) or mailed to the Taos field office.