



THE TAOS NEWS

Best U.S. Weekly Paper- NNA 2007, 2008, 2010
Inland Press Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

Editorial

Transferring federal land to the state? Not a good idea

The Taos News, 3/5/2015

Two bills introduced to the legislature propose creating a task force to study whether it makes sense to transfer control of federal lands to the state.

We can save the state lots of time and money.

It doesn't.

As we see it, those who would have the most to benefit from the land transfer would be big industry, whether it is oil and gas, or timber. Such businesses see the federal government's laws as too prohibitive. We counter that these regulations protect the interest of the public in general.

Not everyone wants to see natural resources exploited at any cost. In fact, as Sen. Carlos Cisneros told a reporter last week, the notion of handing public lands over to the state "goes against the grain" in Taos.

The possibility of a transfer would have a huge impact in Taos County. About 50 percent is federally owned, and we have a legacy of conservation and preservation.

We recall how hard people fought to stop the Forest Service from leasing the Valle Vidal for methane production. The creation of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and Columbine/Hondo Wilderness Area drew strong support from local groups with diverse interests.

Here is another fact to consider: The Carson National Forest and Bureau of Land Management are big local employers.

The notion of transferring federal lands to the states is not a new idea. Already, four Western states with significant amounts of federal land — Idaho, Montana, Nevada and Wyoming — have studied the issue. Utah spent \$450,000 on a 784-page report that went into great depth.

The report concluded transferring federal land would be feasible only if mineral and oil and gas leasing was profitable. That's a big "if."

This session, New Mexico legislators are realizing what happens to the state budget when the oil and gas industry goes from boom to bust. Low gas prices in recent months took a big bite out of state revenues.

Imagine if the state were the steward of land now under federal control. We cringe at the thought of what might happen in a budget crunch. It would be too easy to start selling off land to industry just to make ends meet.

Worse, in New Mexico, state control of federal lands would likely mean one person — the elected State Land Office commissioner— could lease, sell or trade land with very little oversight. We're willing to give the newly elected commissioner Aubrey Dunn a chance to show what he can do, but this office has been prone to controversy in the past. Remember the White Peaks land exchange in 2009?

We're disappointed in Rep. Robert "Bobby" Gonzales, who was among those on the House Committee on Agriculture, Water and Wildlife who voted to approve the bill authorizing the task force. He told a Taos News reporter he was concerned about the conditions of federal lands, particularly when it comes to wildfires. We hardly think the state is in any better position to reduce wildfire risk, let alone cover the cost of fighting massive blazes.

Do we believe the federal government could do a better job maintaining our forests? Yes. But given its resources, we don't believe the state could handle it.

If you feel the same, we urge you to contact Cisneros and Gonzales (their contact info is on the facing page) and let them know where you stand.