

More money for monument in federal budget bill

By J.R. Logan

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In the nearly three years since the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument was created, the field office that manages its 242,000 acres has seen budget cut after budget cut while visitation has steadily increased.

Next year, that will change.

A massive, \$1.1 trillion federal budget bill passed by Congress and signed by the president last week includes a couple of provisions that could bring more money into the monument for land purchases, wildlife surveys and new staff positions.

“It looks like we came out of this omnibus bill in better shape than we’ve been in years,” said monument manager John Bailey with the Bureau of Land Management office in Taos.

The monument was created by presidential proclamation in March 2013. The designation was intended to protect cultural and natural resources on BLM property on the vast Taos Plateau, which includes a long reach of the R’o Grande. It was supported locally by conservationists hoping to preserve the landscape, as well as by business leaders who hope the designation would bring more attention and visitors to the region.

A joint press release from New Mexico’s senators pointed out the federal bill includes \$2.9 million earmarked for the purchase of private property inside the monument’s exterior boundaries. Bailey said the money is expected to buy about 2,500 acres on the west side of the river between Cerro Montoso and Cerro de la Olla.

The bill also sets aside \$5 million to go to newly designated national monuments, such as Rio Grande del Norte.

According to Bailey, increased visitation since the area became a monument means his office could use the help.

“We’ve seen a significant increase at our developed facilities, especially in the Orilla Verde,” Bailey said, adding that campgrounds in the southern part of the monument are full almost every weekend during the camping season and even during the week. “We never saw that before.”

Bailey also said more remote parts of the monument, such as the Taos Plateau west of the river, are also more well-traveled. “There are people wanting to explore what this new monument is all about,” Bailey said.

The BLM was tasked with managing the monument, and Bailey said new funding for the agency as a whole could trickle down to the Taos office to pad the recreation and maintenance budgets.

Bailey said the BLM budget process is among the most complex in the federal government, but he said the bigger visitor numbers should correlate to more money in the coming year.

Bailey said new funds could go to hire more seasonal staff. He said the agency has put more focus on interpretive hikes, which means hiring more rangers.

Bailey also said the BLM would like to do a wildlife survey to see if there is suitable habitat for the reintroduction of certain threatened or endangered species.

“This is good news,” said Jim O’Donnell, a writer, photographer and conservationist who’s been involved in putting together a management plan for the monument.

O’Donnell said he’d like to see more rangers hired, both for public safety as well as the protection of archaeological sites and other resources.

O’Donnell explained that monument designation can be a double-edged sword — awareness of the area means increased visitors and a boost for the economy, but the additional traffic means an area set aside for protection can actually be loved to death.

“If we can have more rangers on the ground, that helps,” he said.

O’Donnell also said buying private properties will help the agency manage the area as a single, contiguous landscape rather than pockets of public land.