

## **Key wilderness designations part of Senate energy bill**

**By J.R. Logan**

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A bill meant to update federal energy policy would also create two new wilderness areas in northern Taos County.

The Energy Policy Modernization Act passed the Senate April 20, with provisions to designate the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta (Ute Mountain) Wilderness and the 8,000-acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness at the north edge of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Both wilderness areas were part of failed legislation to create a conservation area on the same landscape. President Barack Obama used his executive powers to create the national monument, but wilderness designations require an act of Congress.

The wilderness designations in the Senate energy bill would permanently restrict mechanized travel and development inside the wilderness boundaries.

Those designations were part of a bill sponsored by Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, and Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, known as the Cerros del Norte Conservation Act.

In an interview with *The Taos News* Tuesday (May 3), Heinrich called Ute Mountain “iconic” and said the wilderness areas would provide secure habitat for wildlife and could be a draw to bring more visitors to Taos County.

Heinrich said he was happy to see movement on his wilderness proposals and added that the overall energy bill was “a big win for conservation.”

The bill passed by the Senate also includes several provisions that Heinrich has long supported, including the reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as funding to “unlock” public lands that lack access.



**The skirt of Ute Mountain can be seen in this aerial shot of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. An amendment to the proposed Energy Policy Modernization Act seeks to designate a total of 21,420 acres within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, northwest of Taos, as the Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio wilderness areas.**

**Tina Larkin/The Taos News**

While the Senate has already passed the legislation, the House of Representatives is considering its own bill, which at this point does not include the wilderness designations. The House is notoriously more divided, and partisan polarization could mean Ute Mountain and San Antonio wouldn't be part of a final bill that might be sent to the president.

Heinrich said he would fight to keep the designations in the final bill. If he fails, he said he has the sense that there's enough momentum behind the proposal that such a designation will eventually happen.

But for some environmental advocates, parts of the Senate energy bill go too far and make too many concessions to industry.

In particular, the bill would establish a clear deadline for the government to review applications to build facilities for the export of liquid natural gas (LNG). At the moment, some industry advocates argue the government is stalling these applications and limiting access to world markets.

The recent natural gas boom — fueled in large part by new drilling technologies like fracking — meant the U.S. market was saturated with product. By exporting gas, supporters of natural gas export hope to stabilize the price and provide a reliable source of fuel to U.S. allies.

But critics counter that such policies serve only to prop up the fossil fuels industry and perpetuate environmental damage caused by fracking operations.

The inclusion of a provision that could lead to LNG exports actually mirrors a bill co-sponsored by Heinrich, who told

*The Taos News* that natural gas is an important transition fuel as the country moves toward renewables. He also said economies in many parts of the state rely on the gas industry for jobs, and state coffers are directly tied to the success of the industry.

For Heinrich, the possibility of promoting LNG exports and getting a couple wilderness designations is a victory.

But Erik Schlenker-Goodrich with the Western Environmental Law Center said LNG exports would only exacerbate “haphazard development” in the San Juan Basin, including controversial drilling projects near the greater Chaco Canyon area.

To turn that landscape into a “sacrifice zone” as a trade-off to get wilderness established isn’t a fair deal, he said.

“I love wilderness and the prospect of permanent protection for Ute and San Antonio mountains,” he said in an email. “They’re awesome landscapes and important to New Mexicans, including myself. But they’re not under any sort of immediate threat, while fossil fuel export proposals very much do present an immediate threat to our climate, lands and communities. To the degree a trade-off is necessary, I’m far from persuaded that it’s worth it.”

It’s a similar criticism that was levied against an omnibus bill passed last year that includes the designation of the Columbine/Hondo Wilderness, but also included provisions that were far less savory for some environmentalists and conservationists.

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