

Editorial

Thanks to feds working to preserve wilderness areas

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An amendment added recently to a federal energy bill would create two wilderness areas within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. Thank you, Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, for looking out for Northern New Mexico. The Energy Police Modernization Act still needs to be reconciled with a House version before it can go to the president's desk. But the amendment aims to preserve 21,420 acres as the Cerro del Yuta (Ute Mountain) and Rio San Antonio wilderness areas.

As Heinrich, who stopped by *The Taos News* this week, noted, Ute Mountain and the Rio Grande Gorge are two iconic sights within the monument.

Like Heinrich, we see the draw for tourists wanting to experience a high desert wilderness — and for locals who enjoy the great outdoors.

The areas are also a source of water and a refuge for wildlife.

The plan for the wilderness areas has had a great deal of buy-in from locals, just as they supported the creation of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument in 2013. Many recognize the impact the monument would have on our quality of life via recreation and traditional land uses.

We only wish New Mexico Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn felt the same way.

In a story published last week in our sister paper,

The New Mexican, Dunn opposed the amendment's passage because he says it would mean a loss of nearly 1,300 acres of state trust lands.

He noted money generated through mineral leases and timber sales on state trust lands go toward funding public schools, hospitals and beneficiaries.

Dunn released this statement: "With low oil prices already impacting revenues from State Trust Lands, the designation of these new wilderness areas will only add insult to injury and further reduce revenues in support of New Mexico's school children."

But that argument is a ruse. These wildernesses won't lock people out of state land, nor will they affect any income generated by his office.

Instead of spouting rhetoric and bellyaching, Dunn should be working with the federal government to swap out islands of state land that are now inside the national monument. If Dunn were truly concerned about revenue, he'd find a way to consolidate these parcels, making them more valuable for grazing leases and other uses.

Wilderness is not always the answer. There are parts of Taos County where wilderness protections are not appropriate. And we caution wilderness advocates from pushing too hard in places where wilderness lacks support.

But in these two areas of northern Taos County, wilderness makes sense. We hope they make it into the final bill so these landscapes can be preserved in perpetuity.

Now that would be priceless.

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