

## My Turn

# The truth about the 'Protect the Pecos' campaign

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On behalf of the "Protect the Pecos" coalition, we want to take time to provide facts about the ongoing Pecos conservation proposal and why it is important to Taos County, which has a long history of supporting and protecting wilderness areas like the Blue Lake, Columbine-Hondo and Latir wildernesses.

The proposal seeks to preserve certain lands in Taos County adjacent to the Pecos Wilderness from extractive industry and commercial development – threats like oil, gas, fracking, mining, energy development and transmission lines, as well as illegal off-road travel which damages the watershed.

The proposal seeks permanent conservation protection as wilderness for 20,406 acres of pristine, high elevation, steep-sloped roadless areas on the fringes of the existing wilderness near Penasco.

Last week's "My Turn" [July 21-27, 2016] by Taos County Commissioner Candyce O'Donnell quoted Bonifacio Vasquez urging "the Taos county commission, the congressional delegation and the wilderness advocates to consider the historical significance of the land grants and the necessary and historical use of the common lands by the communities." It is important for citizens to know that the proposed area has been roadless, historically, and was never logged by the local traditional communities.

The proposal would also create a "cultural heritage special management area" (SMA) of 14,612 acres to the south of Highway 518. The purpose of this cultural heritage management area is to create a legislative management mandate for the Forest Service to protect traditional cultural uses of this area from mining, fracking, drilling and other harmful development. This will honor traditional cultural uses like dedicated firewood production areas and science- driven forest restoration/ thinning that greatly benefit acequias, livestock permittees and improved hunting/fishing habitat.

There is an unfortunate impression by some that conservationists have been unwilling to engage community stakeholders and are not being sensitive to their concerns. The truth is that there has been outreach to the Penasco area since 2011. Based on these community conversations, we have listened and made significant changes to the proposal to honor the needs of the local communities.

Beyond these meetings, we've had many other conversations, lunches and coffees with residents, grazing permittees and acequia *parciantes*.

These have focused on listening and constructive and respectful dialogue. While we have not resolved all of our differences, we have identified a number of areas of agreement. Virtually everyone has said that these areas deserve permanent protection through some type of

federal legislation. We agree that preserving traditional uses must be honored in any legislation.

We are on record agreeing to the following: No acequia headgates or infrastructure will be included in the proposed boundaries; existing legal motorized routes will remain open; existing legal fuel wood collection sites will remain accessible – long term firewood management should be implemented; stipulating that the proposal is not intended to affect the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; That the SMA include science-based forest restoration including thinning; and welcoming the idea of having the SMA be named as a cultural heritage area.

While there are some who do not recognize the Carson National Forest as public land, and even those who have expressed a desire to open these roadless areas to commercial logging, we do not agree with these positions. We also believe that doing nothing is not an option.

We are honored to have a large and growing list of pueblo, business, organizational and individual supporters. San Miguel and Santa Fe counties and the city of Santa Fe have endorsed this proposal already. Taos, Picuris, Nambe, Pojoaque and Ohkay Owingeh pueblos are also supportive. While it may not be possible to achieve unanimous support for conserving this land, we have pledged to continue our efforts to build as much public support and understanding as possible.

A wilderness designation is the highest level of land protection in our nation and it ensures protection of our high mountain headwaters for our desert state. *Como se dice*, “*Agua es vida*” in New Mexico. These pristine wilderness landscapes of Taos County also attract tourists from around the world which stimulates our economy.

As *parciantes*, fire wood cutters, a farmer and descendants of multiple generations of Hispanic ranchers from Northern New Mexico, it is our legacy to protect our cultural and natural heritage and preserving it for future generations. Make it your legacy, too.

To join our efforts or to learn more, visit [protectthepecos.org](http://protectthepecos.org). We are eager to meet with you, whether it is around a kitchen table, in a school classroom, or an acequia meeting. Let's keep talking.

*Olivas is the traditional community organizer for New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and the current chairman of the Mora County Commission. Salazar is the executive director of Rivers & Birds. Trujillo is the sportsman organizer for New Mexico Wildlife Federation.*



**The Pecos Wilderness is an area within the Santa Fe National Forest and Carson National Forest.**

**Courtesy photo**

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