

## My Turn

# Altering Rio Grande del Norte would be detriment to businesses, public, wildlife

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For years our community worked to preserve the Rio Grande del Norte area for future generations to enjoy.

Our efforts became a reality in 2013, when President Obama listened to the diverse voices and designated it a national monument.

The national monument was supported by our Republican and Democratic elected officials, small businesses, sportsmen, ranchers, Hispanic leaders and other local groups. Unfortunately, the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument – and other New Mexico public lands – is under threat. Outside interests are attempting to privatize, selloff, or transfer our public lands and waters back to the state. They are also trying to dismantle bedrock conservation and environmental laws that we have come to depend upon for clean water, healthy air and abundant outdoor recreation opportunities.

As the owner of Taos Mesa Brewing Co., I understand the economic importance of preserving our natural treasures. My neighborhood businesses include outdoor recreation and tourism, real estate, advertising and automotive and finance/insurance companies. Outdoor recreation companies take people on life-changing adventures, and our hospitality businesses help visitors enjoy their stay.

And thanks to scenic views and access to hiking, biking and more, our real estate and financial businesses help people make their home here in the Land of Enchantment.

So, all of our community's businesses – either directly or indirectly – are fueled by our national monument and other public lands and waters.

De-designating or privatizing our national monument would be a huge detriment to all of our businesses, the employees that work for them and the customers they serve. Here is what we would lose: In just the first year after designation, there was a 40 percent increase in visitors to the national monument.

Additionally, Taos County has enjoyed significant increases in lodgers' tax revenue and gross receipts revenue from the accommodations and food service sector, thanks to the monument. And the tourism industry generated the largest economic impact in our state's history for the sixth straight year in 2016. This resulted in nearly \$6.3 billion being added to the New Mexico economy, which supported 90,400 jobs.

I was not surprised as these figures were revealed over the past three years. The Rio Grande del Norte National Monument holds countless sacred cultural tribal sites, ruins and petroglyphs. It also features 400-year-old Spanish sites. These historical antiquities tell our

community's story and define who we are as New Mexicans. For wildlife lovers, the national monument is home to elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, otter, trout, pike and smallmouth bass and birds of prey. It is also a critical wildlife migration corridor for birds and land animals.

To experience all of these natural and cultural attractions, people come from near and far to hike, camp, raft, fish, hunt, ride horseback and more. Our public lands and waters are our natural playground, and they belong to all Americans.

Our state and nation has come too far to go back to a time when our lands and waters were here only for those who saw them for resource extraction and nothing else. Thanks to the conservation vision of presidents like Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson, we have protected lands and waters that have been handed down from generation to generation. And thanks to presidents like Richard Nixon, we have important environmental safeguards that keep these lands and waters healthy for our children and grandchildren.

One of the reasons our community has continued to thrive as public lands and waters are protected is because businesses prosper in times of certainty. They can start to expand, grow, and take on new endeavors. Knowing that their bread and butter can never be taken away is priceless.

Now is the time for us to come together and ensure that our elected officials keep our public lands public. We must ensure that we all have access to our shared natural heritage.

Our livelihoods depend on it.

*Irion is owner of Taos Mesa Brewing Co.*