

My Turn

Rio Grande del Norte National Monument a 'star on the map in Northern New Mexico'

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The Taos County Commission recently passed a unanimous resolution affirming the support of our beloved Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. This vote also serves as a memorial to the late Ron Gardiner, who worked diligently on the efforts around the monument in the early 1990s.

The vote to support the monument could not come at a more important time.

Recently, outside interests have threatened to repeal our monument here in Taos County – something that our constituents fought for and have come to depend upon for their livelihood, recreation, traditional and small business interests. Continued protection is important for certainty in the ongoing Bureau of Land Management monument planning process to best serve the community as well as protect against further development such as threats of energy transmission running through the monument.

We depend on the monument to hunt, fish and to ranch and graze our cattle.

We go to the canyons, mountains and rivers to hike, fish and gather firewood. And our small businesses have grown and prospered because of the assurance that these lands will always be here.

Over the course of 25 years, a diverse coalition came together to preserve this spectacular place for future generations to enjoy. The group grew to become business owners, elected officials, Native American Tribes, Hispanic/ Latino leaders, ranchers, veterans and conservationists. And when legislation continued to hit a brick wall in Congress, President Obama designated the monument on March 25, 2013. People in Taos celebrated the designation. We celebrated it because we could foresee the economic growth that would come from putting a star on the map in Northern New Mexico. Indeed, there was 40 percent increase in visitors to the monument and Taos County has enjoyed significant increases in lodgers' tax and gross receipts revenues from the accommodations and food service sector. And thanks in part to the monument and our state's other protected public lands, the tourism industry generated the largest economic impact in state history for the sixth year in a row. This resulted in nearly \$6.3 billion being added to the New Mexico economy that supported 90,400 jobs.

We also knew that we were doing our part to safeguard our precious clean water.

The American West is facing worse droughts every year and it is our responsibility to preserve the lifeblood of our community – our water. The monument's watershed helps

sustain a key irrigation source for farmers and acequias and a key water supply for many towns and cities.

We applauded the designation because it would preserve critical wildlife habitat.

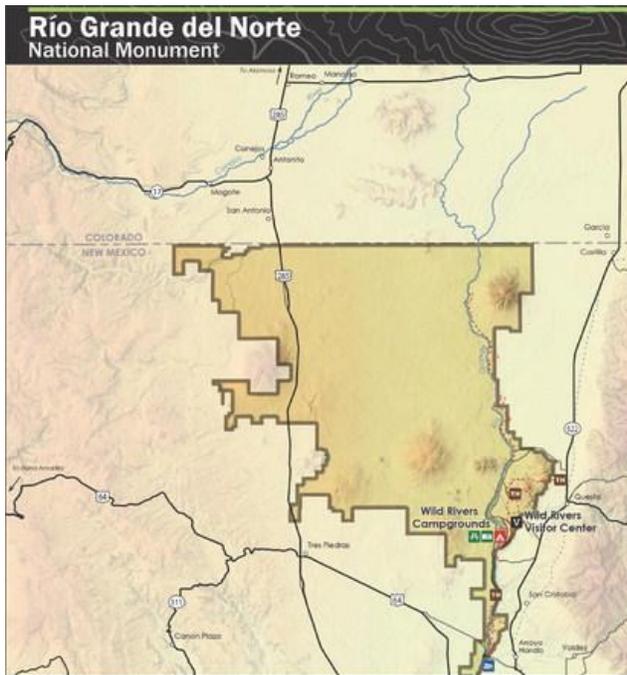
Our monument serves as a rich and essential wildlife habitat for elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, otter, trout, pike and smallmouth bass, and birds of prey, and encompasses a critical wildlife migration corridor. Because of its abundant wildlife, hunters and anglers come from near and far and contribute to Taos County's economic growth.

And finally, the monument holds countless sacred cultural tribal sites, ruins and petroglyphs in addition to several invaluable Spanish cultural sites that date back as far as 400 years. As our resolution states, "The cultural antiquities here are the tangible historic record of human habitation of the entire area and are irreplaceable."

The thought of our community losing something as valuable as the monument is scary. Our businesses would lose portions of their bread and butter. Our communities could lose their clean water.

Our history and culture could be lost should the area be developed. And with all that, Northern New Mexico's bright star could dim. New Mexico has a strong conservation ethic that goes back generations. We are the home, after all, of one of our nation's first wilderness areas. Standing up to keep our public lands public is important for all of us to do. Please join us in defending the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Fambro, Gallegos and Blankenhorn are Taos County commissioners.



Courtesy BLM