

Rio Grande del Norte dragged into monument debate

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The Taos News, 5/4/2017

The president was about the last thing on Roberta Salazar's mind Wednesday morning of last week (April 26).

Salazar walked along the rim of the Rio Grande Gorge with a pack of fourth-graders from the elementary school at Taos Pueblo, talking about geology, plants and the people who walked, hunted, gathered and lived in the landscape hundreds of years back, the ancestors of the kids beside her.

"We emphasize to the children that this area was permanently protected because our community cared enough to say that they wanted to see it remain undeveloped and natural for the benefit of future generations," she said. It wasn't until the next day that she learned President Donald Trump made moves to review and potentially alter national monuments.

The irony was unmistakable.

Trump signed an executive order April 26 calling for Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to review all national monuments created since 1996 and those larger than 100,000 acres.

Created in 2013 by former President Barack Obama and encompassing almost 400 square miles, the Rio Grande del Norte is squarely in the crosshairs of the review.

Unlike national parks, which are created through congressional legislation, national monuments are made by presidential proclamation under the authority of the 1906 Antiquities Act.

Trump's order questions the legitimacy of the most recently created monuments. The review is meant to address whether or not the monuments are too big to manage, too much land for the purpose of protection and if they hurt local economies.

Salazar blasted Trump's order, saying, "We savor our chance to educate future stewards of this landscape even as this misguided order underscores the peril posed by distant politicians like Trump who never had the chance to experience this treasure as these kids do."

"The Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is sacred to many people, including my people of Taos Pueblo," said Taos Pueblo War Chief Curtis Sandoval in a statement from the Rio Grande del Norte Coalition.

"Since it has been recognized as a national monument, it has opened the eyes and hearts of our community to cherish what nature has provided for us. It is an insult to the community of Taos and the citizens of the United States that the Trump administration would challenge the proclamation now," Sandoval said.

For supporters of monuments like Sandoval and Salazar, the executive order was the latest assault on cherished public lands and the efforts taken by communities to protect the vast swaths of the American West.



The skirt of Ute Mountain can be seen in this aerial shot of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Tina Larkin/ Taos News file photo



Students from Taos Day School raft down the Rio Grande in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument Wednesday of last week (April 26).

Photo courtesy Rivers and Birds

But for opponents of some national monuments and of an expansive federal government more broadly, the order was a tangible step toward stopping or reversing what are seen as major and inexcusable land grabs through executive power.

Various iterations of the sentiments that led to Trump's order have cropped up over the past few years.

Certainly, overreach of the federal government in public lands was a core rallying cry of the 2016 armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon that lasted longer than a month. More recently, Utah's Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz introduced legislation to transfer millions of

acres of federal lands to states — legislation he withdrew after outdoor enthusiasts and advocates mounted fierce opposition.

After Wednesday's executive order, New Mexico's congressional representatives, including Sen. Tom Udall (D), Sen. Martin Heinrich (D) and Rep. Ben Ray Lujan (D), were quick to respond with calls to leave national monuments intact.

While the Antiquities Act gives the president power to create monuments, it doesn't give him or her the power to revoke them.

As with the tensions and escalating legal battles over local governments' immigrant sanctuary policies, what comes after last week's executive order is anybody's guess.

"President Trump and Secretary Zinke are walking into a political and legal minefield if they think they can revoke or alter national monument designations," said Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, executive director of the Western Environmental Law Center.

"These designations, in particular the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument ... enjoy deep and expansive support from a broad spectrum of the community. If Trump and Zinke use this review as a pretext to revoke or attack our national monuments, you can be certain they will provoke a fierce fight I anticipate they'll come to deeply regret," he said.

Indeed, the Rio Grande del Norte enjoyed far more cohesive support than some others, such as Bears Ears in Utah, which Obama designated in the waning days of his last term.

But that doesn't mean Taos County's monument is shielded from the impacts of Zinke's review, which is due to the president in mid-August.

The review could hinder a deal between the New Mexico State Land Office and the Bureau of Land Management that would add another 41,000 acres to the 242,455-acre Rio Grande del Norte.

State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn has been negotiating an agreement to trade about 41,000 acres of state-owned surface and mineral rights within the monument with the BLM in exchange for about 78,000 acres of federal land in 13 New Mexico counties that "are more favorable for economic development," according to the office.

Those 41,000 acres are intermingled within the monument, according to Kristin Haase, the office's assistant commissioner for communications. The exchange is meant to "consolidate and pull our assets out of the monument" so that the Rio Grande del Norte is "essentially one piece of land." While this is the only land exchange in the works right now, Haase said, such transfers are "not uncommon at all."

Dunn worries the monument review will delay the closing date on the land exchange past his term.

And just like the night-and-day attitudes about public lands between Obama and Trump, a different land commissioner might have other priorities and call the whole deal off.



**Cisco Guevara, owner of Los Rios River Runners, at a rally for the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument Tuesday (May 2).
Photo courtesy of Susan Torres**



**A rally for the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument Tuesday (May 2).
Photo courtesy of Susan Torres**