

Editorial

Leave the monument designations alone, including the Rio Grande del Norte.

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President Donald Trump and his administration need to back off of their move to review and potentially undo protections for national monuments designated after 1996, including the Rio Grande del Norte.

The president, as outlined in the executive order requiring the review, thinks the designations of some monuments lacked proper public outreach, curtail public access, impede “energy independence,” “burden local governments” and “curtail economic growth.”

Translated, what the president means in large part is, that the monument designation prevents oil and gas companies from drilling on those lands and prevents the sale of some parcels to private parties.

It was precisely the threat of drilling and other development that brought people together to protect the 242,500-acre Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. It took years and a lot of negotiation to craft a plan for a monument that a diverse group of *nortenos* could agree on.

As two Taos County commissioners note in an opinion piece this issue, work on the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument involved cooperation from “ranchers and grazing permittees, hunters and fishermen, small business owners and Tribes, rafters and hikers, Hispanic leaders and veterans, mountain bikers and horseback riders, and countless others.”

Based on their work and advocacy, former President Barack Obama designated the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument in March 2013.

Trump’s administration could undo all their work.

But based on other moves the Trump administration is making, there might be a deeper issue at stake than the monument designations. His administration is taking steps that could make it easier down the road to finally do what some conservatives have long sought: turn over federal public lands to state and local control. Trump’s “America First” budget proposal will cut funding to the U.S. Department of Agriculture – which oversees the U.S. Forest Service – “streamline” funding to the Bureau of Land Management and reduce “payments in lieu of taxes” to counties. Counties receive these PILT funds to make up for the money they lose in property taxes they can’t collect on public land.

Taos County received \$1.6 million in PILT funding last year. That could dwindle under the Trump budget proposal.

The acts of choking off funding to federal land managers and reducing the tax payments for public lands to local governments set up a push to hand those lands over to states.

We urge President Trump and Congress to:

- Leave the monument designations alone, including the Rio Grande del Norte.

- Restore funding to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of the Interior to properly manage public lands.
- Ensure the full mandatory PILT payments will go to rural counties, as the National Association of Counties requested in January.

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