

My Turn

Defending our Land of Enchantment

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'The thought of our community losing something as cherished and valuable as the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is chilling.'

Last week, we were stunned to watch President Donald J. Trump sign an Executive Order that could jeopardize the very existence of one of our community's most treasured assets: the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. As elected officials, we are keenly aware of what matters to our constituents, and this order from Washington flies in the face of what most people want.

The executive order "directs the Department of the Interior to review prior monument designations and suggest legislative changes or modifications to the monument proclamations." And sadly, Rio Grande del Norte is on "the list" of proclamations to review.

Should the Trump administration or Congress rescind or abolish our national monument, the land could be sold for energy exploration or development.

This could not be further from what the people of Taos County want. Last year, with the support of our community, we passed a unanimous resolution re-affirming our support for the monument designation that took place over four years ago.

When the national monument was designated, people from all walks of life – including 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 who love to explore New Mexico's natural playground – truly celebrated. In fact, these constituencies worked together for years to get legislation passed through Congress. And when that failed, they asked the President to use his authority under the Antiquities Act to protect it as a national monument.

This did not happen in one ceremony in Washington, nor did it happen in a mere 120 days. It was the culmination of decades of community dialogue, meetings with our congressional representatives, and visits with administration officials in Washington, D.C.

Secretary Zinke has never listened to or met with our constituents, nor has he worked with our federal elected officials who know the area. He is being tasked with deciding the fate of our treasured national monument without ever having explored it or seen firsthand the incredible cultural and natural treasures protected within it. Indeed, Rio Grande del Norte National Monument holds many sacred cultural tribal sites, ruins and petroglyphs within its boundaries. This is in addition to several invaluable Spanish cultural sites that date back as far as 400 years. The monument is also a wildlife migration corridor, serving as a home to elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, birds of prey, and otters. Its rivers provide cool waters for trout, pike and smallmouth bass. This abundance of wildlife draws hunters and anglers from near and far to visit and enjoy, and they contribute to our economic growth as a result.

Speaking of economic growth, there has been a 40 percent increase in visitors to the national monument since its designation, and Taos County has enjoyed substantial increases in lodgers' tax revenue and gross receipts revenue from the accommodations and food service sector. And thanks in part to our state's protected public lands like Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, the tourism industry generated the largest economic impact in state history for the sixth year in a row. We saw nearly \$6.3 billion added to New Mexico's economy, supporting 90,400 jobs, as a result.

In addition to being an economic powerhouse for Taos County, the national monument safeguards our water. One thing we all understand here in northern New Mexico is that it is all of our responsibilities to preserve the lifeblood of our community – our water. Rio Grande del Norte's watershed provides clean water for many towns and cities, and helps sustain critical irrigation sources for farmers and acequias.

The thought of our community losing something as cherished and valuable as the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is chilling. Our businesses would lose their bread and butter. Our water supply could be threatened or compromised. And our rich and vibrant history and culture could be lost should the area be developed.

New Mexico's public lands define who we are. We are the Land of Enchantment. We are the land of deep canyons, wildflower-filled meadows, and breathtaking vistas as far as the eye can see. Rio Grande del Norte is who we are. Please join us in defending our national monument.

Gallegos and Blankenhorn are Taos County commissioners.