

Udall drums up more support for national monument

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Even though Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, thinks the Trump administration doesn't have the license to undo or shrink national monuments, he was in Pilar Friday (July 21) to rally local support for the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

The U.S. Department of the Interior is reviewing 27 monuments, including most of the monuments designated under the Obama administration, with an eye to rolling back protections or reducing the size of the protected areas. Udall's visit came in the final stretch of the review, which includes both the Rio Grande del Norte and the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument in Dona Ana County.

National monuments are designated by the president under the authority of the 1906 Antiquities Act. Trump has called some designations "land grabs" by the federal government.

"I don't think the president has the legal authority" to alter the boundaries of monuments, Udall told *The Taos News*. But should the Trump administration make moves to alter either of New Mexico's monuments, environmental advocacy organizations will likely take the government to court, Udall said, adding that he and other lawmakers may file briefs with the court.

The Rio Grande del Norte has enjoyed broad support both before and after its designation, support that was on full display Friday during Udall's "roundtable" in a pavilion at the Rio Bravo Campground. Several Taos Pueblo leaders, including War Chief Curtis Sandoval and Lt. Gov. Delbert Chisholm, voiced their support for the monument, as did a bevy of outfitters, guides and elected officials.

"All land is sacred," said Damian Aguilar, from Santo Domingo Pueblo.

"Coming out here is like no other experience. It's our church," Aguilar said.

While Udall talked up the economic benefits of the outdoor industry, public lands do take away from the tax base for local governments. To compensate, the federal government doles out "payment in lieu of taxes," or PILT. Udall suggested making PILT "permanent and mandatory" in order to alleviate the political jockeying that seems to put the money in jeopardy every year. Reforms to PILT "had a better chance in the last Congress, but we're going to keep working with the Republicans and try to get it done," he said.

Udall is the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the Department of the Interior's budget. He has talked about the monument review one-on-one with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke three times. Udall said he felt "good progress" had been made in those conversations.

Udall has been rallying public support for the Rio Grande del Norte to demonstrate to Zinke that the monument still attracts fierce loyalty.

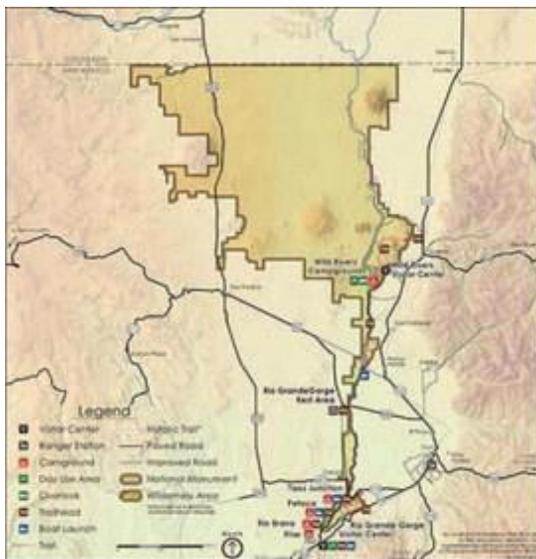
Zinke, whose department this week made moves to undo federal rules governing fracking for oil and gas, suggested in interviews with media in June that he might leave the New Mexico monuments alone. Meanwhile, Zinke is beginning to unveil his interim decisions; he announced earlier this week that there would be no change to the Canyon of the Ancients National Monument in Colorado.

Udall's trip came ahead of an expected visit by Zinke to New Mexico as part of his review. Zinke's staff did not respond to multiple requests for details of his visit.



Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, fishes with local young people from Taos on the Rio Grande while touring the area in support of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument Friday (July 21). Udall has been drumming up support for the monument.

Photo by Cody Hooks



**Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.
Map courtesy Bureau of Land Management**