

Fate of Rio Grande del Norte National Monument unsure

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The Taos News, 8/31/2017

The fate of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument here in Taos County is still unknown a week after U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke delivered a recommendation on 27 national monuments Aug. 24 to President Donald Trump.

The four-month review of recently designated national monuments and those more than 100,000 acres in size was initiated by Trump in April with an executive order that was among a flurry of such actions in the early days of his administration.

Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument in Do-a Ana County, created in 2014 by former President Barack Obama, was included in the review, along with the Rio Grande del Norte, established in 2013.

For monument supporters, the review was the latest assault on cherished public lands communities across the country have fought to protect, especially from oil and gas development. But opponents of some national monuments, including vocal ranchers in Southern New Mexico, saw the order as a tangible step toward stopping what they considered an inexcusable land grab through executive power.

Zinke released a two-page summary of his review Thursday (Aug. 24).

While Zinke has stated he's not recommending the president eliminate any national monuments, the summary contained no specific details about any monument.

"[Public] comments received were overwhelmingly in favor of maintaining existing monuments and demonstrated a well-orchestrated national campaign organized by multiple organizations," the report read.

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall criticized the report's scant details.

"I am disappointed that the summary of Secretary Zinke's recommendations to the president does not provide any real information to the public. This summary is not transparent and this is not how our government should do business. The threat to New Mexico's monuments is very real," Udall said via a press release Thursday.

"New Mexicans have spoken loudly and clearly. They do not want to shrink our national monuments – and they deserve to know what the administration plans to do with the natural treasures they have worked for years to protect," Udall said.

Local environmental groups echoed those sentiments.

"The monument is critically important to the Northern New Mexico community and economy. Secretary Zinke's sham process is an insult to all of us who love and depend upon the water and land resources of the Rio Grande del Norte," said Rachel Conn of the nonprofit Amigos Bravos.

“The lack of clarity from Secretary Zinke is deeply troubling, underscoring the suspect nature of the administration’s monument review process,” Erik Schenker-Goodrich, executive director of the Western Environmental Law Center, told

The Taos News Aug. 29.

“However, the [center], as always, stands ready to defend the American West’s national monuments hand in hand with our allies and the West’s communities,” he said.

The *Washington Post* reported Aug. 24 that, according to some people briefed on the recommendations, Zinke suggested shrinking three monuments, including Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante in Utah and another in Oregon.

Zinke’s review was often a showy tour. It included visits to eight monuments, as well as a horseback trip to the Sabinoso Wilderness with Udall and U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, both Democrats.

Following the trip with New Mexico’s two senators, Zinke announced he’s supportive of opening the wilderness, which is currently marooned among private land.

The review has held up a land exchange 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.

As of press time, neither the local office of the Bureau of Land Management nor the Washington, D.C., office of the Department of the Interior had answered *The Taos News*’ inquiries about the details of the Rio Grande del Norte.



The Rio Grande Gorge, pictured here at Wild Rivers Recreation Area near Cerro, is a central feature of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Jesse Moya