

Monument to move forward

By **Cody Hooks**, chooks@taosnews.com

The Taos News, 10/5/2017

A land exchange that would officially add thousands of acres to the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument – one that was put on hold due to a federal review of national monuments – is again moving forward.

The U.S. Department of the Interior approved a land transfer agreement between the New Mexico State Land Office and the Bureau of Land Management “that will consolidate state and federal holdings within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and the Sabinoso Wilderness Area,” according to a Wednesday (Oct. 4) press release from State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn.

Before the Department of the Interior set out on what would turn into a four-month review of recent and controversial national monuments, Dunn had 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 previous statements from his office.

Those 41,000 acres are intermingled within the monument. The exchange is meant to “consolidate and pull our assets out of the monument” so that the monument (which is currently about 242,455 acres) is “essentially one piece of land,” Kristin Haase, the office’s assistant commissioner for communications, previously told *The Taos News*.

The deal would also transfer about 2,000 acres of state-owned lands within the Sabinoso Wilderness in San Miguel County to the BLM, which manages the approximately 16,000-acre area that has been isolated from public access by private land.

“This exchange is significant because the BLM can fully implement its objective as a public land manager and the State Land Office can fulfill our mandate, which is to generate revenue for public education,” said Dunn.

Currently, the state and federal agencies “are identifying all encumbrances on the lands that would be affected including all leases, permits, rights-of-way, land use authorizations and valid existing rights,” according to the release.

Lands handed over to the state will “have the same fair market value” as the lands transferred to the federal government, it read.

The BLM could gain about 43,000 acres of state land from the deal, called an “agreement to initiate,” while the state could get about 78,000 acres of federal land.