

Rep. Luján pushes wilderness in national monument

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

The Taos News, 4/26/2018

Just one day after taking a stroll along the river in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument to celebrate its fifth anniversary, U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján introduced a bill to create more than 21,000 acres of wilderness within the monument.

“It’s always tough with a public lands piece of legislation under a Republican president,” Luján told *The Taos News* Monday (April 23) during his visit to the Orilla Verde Recreation Area. Still, he thinks the bill could have real traction in the near future.

The bill (H.R. 5600) is a nearly identical companion to a bill that unanimously passed the Senate in December. Luján said the congressional delegation is now being “a little more aggressive” in getting the wilderness bill attached to a larger piece of omnibus legislation.

Wilderness bills for the national monument have been introduced in both chambers of Congress since former President Barack Obama created the monument via a proclamation in 2013.

The move was praised by several local public land advocates. “We need every warrior who will stand up for Mother Earth and future generations before the natural world is lost. Our children’s children must experience sacred places on Mother Earth without the negative influence of humans on it,” said Taos Pueblo Warchief Secretary Dwayne Lefthand in a press release from Rivers and Birds.

Luján said that future conservation legislation could include pushing for wilderness around Cerro de la Olla (Pot Mountain), also located within the monument. Rivers and Birds, along with local ranchers, asked the Taos County Board of Commissioners to support the Cerro de la Olla efforts at a recent public meeting.



Congressman Ben Ray Luján (left) crosses the Taos Junction Bridge alongside New Mexico Wilderness Alliance organizer John Olivas Monday (April 23) during the congressman’s visit to the R’o Grande del Norte National Monument.
Morgan Timms