

Monument land swap called off amid acid politics

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If all had gone according to plan, the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument could have added thousands of acres within its current boundaries. But the plan has been called off.

State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn announced Wednesday (July 18) he was suspending the deal between his office and the federal Bureau of Land Management to swap land.

Dunn's primary reason is what he says is a "lack of commitment" to follow through with the trade by the Democratic candidate in the three-way race to replace Dunn in the State Land Office.

Peppered throughout the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, which is managed by the BLM, is about 43,000 acres of state trust lands. The deal would have officially added those acres to the monument, consolidating the federal government's assets and unifying management of the Northern New Mexico landscape.

In turn, the state would have picked up almost twice the amount of land it was ditching: approximately 78,000 federal acres in 13 counties, including Colfax, Mora, Rio Arriba and Santa Fe counties.

A BLM spokesperson confirmed the land exchange had been "suspended for now." The land swap has received a lot of fanfare for the past several years, including a public event in October 2017 where Dunn and the acting state director of the BLM signed an agreement to go forward with the deal.

However, Dunn said in the press release announcing the cancellation that he won't be able to finish the swap while he's in office (he did not run for re-election) because land appraisals wouldn't be finished during his remaining months in office. He can't "bind the next commissioner to future payments nor to completing a land exchange — especially if they have expressed an unwillingness to commit to completing the project."

Stephanie Garcia Richard, a state representative and Democratic candidate for the land office, "indicated that she will not go forward with this exchange if she becomes the next Commissioner of Public Land," read the release.

But Garcia Richards disputed that characterization, saying in a July 20 email that land swaps "must include a more thorough public process, which I am committed to facilitating." Garcia Richards narrowly beat Garrett VeneKlasen in the June primary election and will face off against Libertarian Michael Lucero and Republican Patrick Lyons in the November election.

"The current exchange being proposed by the land office is indicative of backroom, closed-door decision-making that the office has become famous for. I think folks are frustrated with the current land office because it doesn't proactively include the voices of the public and impacted stakeholders," Garcia Richards said.

She said Dunn's "pressuring a candidate to make this decision behind closed doors and without public input or scrutiny is unconscionable and demonstrates the true lack of transparency in this office."

"If elected to the land office, I will pursue a land exchange by negotiating the best deal for New Mexico's resources," she said.

A spokesperson for the land office told *The Taos News* Dunn's staff had devoted approximately 300 hours to the exchange, including a trip to Washington, D.C., to discuss the project with the BLM and Department of Interior. Dunn estimates the land office would need to spend about \$150,000 to \$200,000 to complete the exchange. The land trade would've also transferred 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.

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- Stephanie Garcia Richards, Democratic candidate for State Land Office

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