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My Turn

Bipartisan land deal is good for New Mexico; why is it on hold?

By Susan Torres and Todd Leahy

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At a time when bipartisan support is rare to come by, it's puzzling and disappointing that an unnecessary fight is brewing over what had previously been seen as a win for multiple agencies and the people of New Mexico. A land swap deal widely heralded as a bipartisan win is now on hold because of what seems to be confusion and a lack of direct conversations between relevant parties.

On July 18, State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn announced that he was calling off a land swap that would have opened up 43,000 acres of state land in R'o Grande del Norte National Monument and increased access to the Sabinoso Wilderness. The state would have picked up almost twice the amount of land in return, gaining approximately 78,000 federal acres in 13 counties.

After the statement from the State Land Office, a Bureau of Land Management official added that the deal is now off. The reasons for this are confusing, but it seems to be partially because Democratic candidate for state land commissioner Stephanie Garcia Richards says she is against the land swap, claiming the swap is a "backroom deal."

The State Land Office is tasked with managing state lands for the greatest monetary benefit to the state. This deal was worked out between multiple agencies and nongovernmental organizations who all saw it as an all-around win, bringing in revenue for the state and opening up public lands to more people.

Claiming that this deal was done in a backroom way is not only disingenuous. It's not in the best interest of the public.

While transparency is obviously an admirable goal, lack of transparency does not seem to be the issue in the case. A lack of background knowledge about this deal seems to be the biggest issue preventing the land swap from going through.

We encourage all parties involved to sit down again and lay out the details of this plan. Speaking through the press and not directly to those involved in finalizing the plan will only lead to more confusion and distrust. This swap was good for access, good for New Mexico and we encourage everyone who has the power to make sure this deal goes through.

Susan Torres and Todd Leahy work with the New Mexico Wildlife Federation.

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