

## **U.S. Interior official visits; Gorge up for wilderness protection**

**By Matthew van Buren**

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A federal effort to create new wilderness areas brought Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Hayes to the Rio Grande Gorge earlier this month.

During a Sept. 15 trip to Taos, Hayes said he had not been in the area before but was visiting prior to submitting a proposal to Congress that would preserve some remarkable areas around the country, preserving wilderness areas in perpetuity by an act of Congress.

“We’re looking to identify some ‘crown jewels,’” he said. “This is the heritage of the area.”

According to a release from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Hayes also visited California to see the site of the proposed Beauty Mountain Wilderness in San Diego County, Sept. 17.

Hayes was taking the tours in order to solicit input from local officials; he will deliver a report to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Congress regarding proposed wilderness areas he hopes the 112th Congress will vote to create.

Among those who greeted Hayes on his visit to the Gorge were Questa Mayor Esther Garc'a and Councilor Evelyn Ortega-Coggins, Taos County Manager Jacob Caldwell and representatives from the offices of Congressman Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, and Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM.

Bingaman has been a proponent of creating the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, which would comprise 214,000 acres, including a 13,400-acre wilderness area, Cerro del Yuta, to the east, and an 8,000-acre wilderness area, Rio San Antonio, to the west.

According to information from the BLM, Congress designates such conservation areas “to conserve, protect, enhance and manage public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

Hayes praised the R'o Grande del Norte conservation proposal, saying it was conceived locally, will help the area's economy into the future and protects traditional uses of the land. He said local buy-in is crucial to such proposals.

Caldwell referred to the Gorge as “our best and most lasting resource,” saying it should be protected.

“It is just naturally stunning here,” he said.

Garcia and Ortega-Coggins said land grant heirs were consulted as the concept was being formed, and they are supportive of the proposed language that would allow historic uses of the area, such as grazing and wood-gathering, to continue.

“We’re all in favor of it,” Garcia said.

In a phone interview with

*The Taos News*, Garcia said forested areas in Wyoming are suffering because of oil and gas drilling, and she hopes the same won’t happen here.

“It’s really destroying the area,” she said.

She said she hopes a new designation for the Gorge will help preserve it for future generations.

“The conservation area is really important for me,” she said.

Hayes said a report due Oct. 15 will be submitted for review, and he hopes it will be approved by Congress. He said it will contain information about the ‘crown jewels’ his department helps to identify, such as their locations and unique features. He said he hopes representatives in Washington, D.C., can “get beyond the partisanship” to vote in favor of protecting areas such as the R’o Grande Gorge.

“Let’s implement the will of the people,” he said.

Hayes said he is unsure how long it will take for Congress to approve the recommendations. Trudy Vincent, legislative director for Bingaman’s office, said passing legislation could be difficult but pointed to the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 as an example that the proposal can be successful.

“It’s a very large compromise,” she said. “It’s been done before. We can do it again.”

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