

Testimony of Ester Garcia
Mayor, Village of Questa, New Mexico
H.R. 1241, the Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Area Establishment Act
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today's hearing on H.R. 1241, legislation introduced by my Congressman, the Honorable Ben Ray Lujan, and cosponsored by his colleague, a fellow New Mexican and also a Member of this Committee, Representative Martin Heinrich.

I appreciate this opportunity to urge your support for H.R. 1241 to establish the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area. As a life-long resident of northern New Mexico, with my family going back many generations living and working in this unique and beautiful landscape, I wish to convey to you my heartfelt belief that the Congress must act to protect what to many of us is truly sacred land. And, I want to congratulate and publicly thank Congressmen Lujan and Heinrich, as well as Senators Bingaman and Udall. With their leadership, this historic legislation will forever protect a truly amazing natural gem, including the stunning Rio Grande gorge – which at some places is a half mile wide across, dropping to the Rio Grande River 800 feet below.

Like you, I serve in elective office -- as Mayor of the village of Questa, north of Taos, New Mexico. As an elected official, I know full well the difficult choices one must make when representing one's constituents and the need to balance competing interests. And, this is what has brought me before you here today---on behalf of not only the citizens I have the pleasure to represent, but also the vast majority of all northern New Mexicans who seek to safeguard these special lands for our children and grandchildren. I can assure you that support for this legislation is broad, deep and strong.

I would like to acknowledge Mr. Erminio Martinez, who made the journey here with me from Taos County. A 12th generation New Mexican, Mr. Martinez grazes cattle in Taos County

as his ancestors have done for hundreds of years. He has also served as a magistrate judge in Taos County, and has submitted written testimony for this hearing.

My grandfather, J. P. Real, and his brothers formed a cattle business and general store in Questa in 1930. When I grew up, there was no running water. We walked to the store, grew our own food, and put up hay for our cattle. We survived because of the land and water that nature had so generously provided us. As my grandfather said, “Without land you have nothing, without water there is no life.”

So far as I am aware, no one disputes that the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area is a landscape of extraordinary scenic, environmental, economic, cultural, and recreational value. This is a high mesa of sagebrush and grasslands interspersed with volcanic cinder cones covered with piñon-juniper woodlands. Here, in the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Gorge, are vital elk wintering grounds, key habitat for bighorn sheep, antelope and deer, and an world renowned migratory corridor for birds of prey—Peregrine falcons, Bald eagles, and Golden eagles.

Across this landscape, we who live nearby and a growing number of visitors enjoy hunting, fishing, bird watching, photography, hiking, camping, river rafting, mountain climbing, piñon picking, and the amazing national scenery. All of this is vital support for our local economy. Hunting and fishing alone in the Rio Grande area contribute tens of millions of dollars to New Mexico's economy annually.

Communities such as Questa, Hondo, Cerro, Pilar, and Antonito have been bound economically and spiritually to this wild landscape for many generations. One of the great virtues of H.R. 1241 is that it takes a comprehensive approach to the conservation of this landscape, with full recognition that there is a long human history to this region and that our small communities continue to be an essential element of the landscape. The legislation will protect both the natural resources and the way of life of this unique area, both of which are intrinsically linked in our community.

Those of us with deep roots in northern New Mexico appreciate that the protection of these landscapes preserves grazing within the National Conservation Area, and specifically protects our right to hunt, fish and collect piñon nuts and firewood. It directs the Bureau of Land Management to preserve the cultural, natural and scenic resources in the area. The measure will help ensure that these ancestral lands will remain as they are for those who will come after us.

Mr. Chairman, there is overwhelming local support for this legislation. Because of the collaborative way our congressional delegation has crafted this measure, many groups that haven't always seen eye to eye on conservation issues have come together to support protecting this special landscape. Community involvement was extensive and the considerations taken in the bill's language to accommodate the needs of traditional communities were significant. The legislation being before this subcommittee today is the product of years of meetings and discussions amongst those most affected, and I can assure you that northern New Mexicans overwhelmingly back it.

To ensure that you have a complete record illustrating the very broad support for this legislation in our local communities, I would like to submit these official documents. The first is the Resolution of support of the Taos County Commission, May 19, 2009. As you will see, the Commission resolved that it:

... recommends that Congress enact...the Rio Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act, and that the legislation include appropriate language to protect the Rio San Antonio Wilderness and the Cerro del Yuta Wilderness in order to protect their scenic, environmental, economic, and recreational values."

I am also submitting for the record a list of some of the varied supporters for the proposal.

Thank you for your consideration, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. This concludes my statement. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Endorsing Newspapers:

Taos News
Santa Fe New Mexican
Albuquerque Journal

Endorsing Organizations:

San Antonio de Río Colorado Land Grant
Taos County Chamber of Commerce
Mora Valley Chamber of Commerce
Hondo Mesa Community Association
Sustain Taos Rivers and Birds Western Environmental Law Center
Taos Business Alliance
Taos Land Trust
Latino Sustainability Institute
New Mexico Wildlife Federation
New Mexico Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
New Mexico Wilderness Alliance
The Wilderness Society

Business owners:

Act One Gallery
Acuarelas Studio Gallery
Angie Colman Studio
Antiquarians Imports
Art Divas
Bookmarks Literary Services
Brazos Fine Art
Charles Collins Gallery
Chantal
Christmas in Taos Village Shop
Claireworks
Clark and Company
Cold Smoke Photography
Copy Queen of Taos
Coyote Moon
Dragonfly Cafe
Dobson House Bed and Breakfast
Doug West Gallery
El Porvenir

El Rincon Trading Post
Emily Ruffin Design
Enchanted Dreams Foundation
Far-Flung Adventures
Fernandez de Taos Bookstore
Fidget Gallery
For Art's Sake
Francesca's Clothing Boutiques
Frank Seckler Gallery
From the Andes
Garden and Soul
Gypsy 360 Café
Hair Bodyworks
Hondo Mesa Community Association
Hotel La Fonda
Import Outlet
Indian Hills Jewelry, Inc.
Jack Leustig Imaging
Jewelry and Painting Studio
La Lana Wools
Las Comadres
La Tierra Mineral Gallery
Leatherworks
Maison Faurie Antiquities
Maverick County Cafe
Mineral and Fossil Gallery
Michael McCormick Gallery
Michael G. Rosenberg and Associates, P.C.
Moby Dickens Bookshop of Taos
Morgan Gallery
Mountain Comfort Furnishings
Nicolas Salads and Soups
North Star Inn
Old Taos Traders
One World
Pitter Patter Collections, Inc.
Robert Mirabal Music Flutes and Native Gifts
Roosters Coffee
Sage Fine Art
Sapo
Sands of Time Glass
Scott Carlson Pottery
Seco Pearl
Southwest Framers

Southwest Sew and Vac
Stephan Killborn Gallery
Shoe-ri-fic
Starving Artists Gallery
Spanish Steps Gallery
Steppin' Out and Steppin' Out 2
Sun Shades of Taos
Stephen Rose, Attorney-at-Law
Starr Interiors
Silvermountain Designs
Tailwater Gallery and Flyshop
Taos Adobe Quilting
Taos Artisans Gallery
Taos Business Alliance
Taos Cookery
Taos Cow, Arroyo Seco
Taos Blue
Taos Cowboy
Taos Fly Shop
Taos Inn
Taos Lending Team
Taos Mercantile Co
Taos Mountain Outfitters
Taos Sunflower Yarns and Fibers
Taos Trading Company
The Bean, Inc.
The Broadsky Bookshop
The UPS Store
Three Dog Art
The Yarn Shop
The Taos Company
The Toy Basket
Total Arts Gallery, Inc.
Twirl
Twining Weavers
Walden Fine Art
Wildsmith Gallery
Wolf Prints
Woodall Fine Art Enterprises, Inc.
Xocoatle Chocolate

