

Statement by Mr. Lujan of New Mexico
Subcommittee on Nation Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Hearing on H.R. 1241 – To establish the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area in
the State of New Mexico
March 29, 2012

Mr. Chairman - I want to thank you for having this hearing today to talk about the value of protecting our public lands in New Mexico and the role they play in living out the centuries old cultures and traditions we have in there. H.R. 1241, a bill to establish the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, is a big step forward in the effort to protect environmentally sensitive areas as well as recognize the traditional uses of the land that means so much to the history and future of New Mexico.

Historically – the towns, villages and pueblos that have lived off the forest and grasslands in New Mexico pre-date the creation of the U.S. Forest Service. We have a very close cultural connection to the land. Both Native Americans and Spanish settlers used these lands for subsistence, and for centuries have treasured and helped to successfully manage the resources that the life-giving forests and grasslands contain.

For those of you who aren't familiar with New Mexico's rich traditions - a **Land Grant** is a communal grant of land given to a community or village in perpetuity for the purpose of subsistence and sustenance – An **Acequia** is a centuries old irrigation canal which is governed through the collective maintenance of the water system so that water can flow to the fields for irrigating crops – both of which have allowed New Mexico settlements to thrive and still play an important role in our culture, our daily lives, and in the relationship between these communities and our public lands.

Before New Mexico was a territory of the United States, Land Grant Communities, Rural Villages and Acequias were governed through the communal management of natural resources, including water, timber, grazing lands, wildlife, herbs, and fields that were the life of these communities. These traditions still exist today and can be strengthened by the protection of areas like those outlined in H.R. 1241 - **The Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area**. The threat that development poses to these traditions will negatively impact our culture, making protection of these lands so critical, not to mention the protection of vital wildlife habitat and environmentally sensitive areas in the region.

Not only do these lands represent the collective cultural and traditional history of the communities that surround the proposed Conservation and Wilderness Area, they also represent the collective effort between the conservation community and local stakeholders to protect lands that are as beautiful as they are culturally sensitive.

Many years of work went in to the creation of this proposal with local communities, grazing permittees, land grant communities, acequia organization, local businesses, and conservation organizations. The legislation not only recognizes and reflects the need to protect these areas,

but also takes into account the special access that needs to be allowed to these lands for the traditions and cultures of the surrounding communities to thrive. I am confident with a few technical changes that the bill can be strengthened to protect the heritage of New Mexico and I am committed to do that.

Mr. Chairman, the environmentally, culturally, and historically rich landscapes of the San Luis Valley and Rio Grande Gorge that encompass the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area are part of Mexico's rich treasures. Growing up in the small community of Nambé I know the importance of access to the land and that is why I appreciate the work that has been done with this proposal which offers protection of beautiful landscapes, preserves grazing, and specifically protects our right to carry out the centuries old traditions that make us uniquely New Mexican.

Thank you

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