

Rio Grande del Norte Coalition



Congressional Testimony

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Esther Garcia

**Mayor of Questa, New Mexico
San Antonio de Rio Colorado Land Grant Heir
Questa Acequia Association President**

Mike Pool

**Deputy Director, BLM
Department of Interior**

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

March 29, 2012

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.

**Statement of
Mike Pool, Deputy Director
Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
H.R 1241, Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Act
March 29, 2012**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 1241, the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act. The Department of the Interior supports H.R. 1241, which designates the nearly 236,000-acre Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area (NCA) in northern New Mexico as well as two wilderness areas within the NCA. The Secretary's November 2011 *Preliminary Report to Congress on BLM Lands Deserving Protection as National Conservation Areas, Wilderness or Other Conservation Designations* highlighted the Río Grande del Norte as a proposal deserving Congress' prompt attention.

Background

The proposed Río Grande del Norte NCA lies north of Taos on the border with Colorado and straddles Taos and Río Arriba Counties. The area includes the Cerro de la Olla, Cerro San Antonio and Cerro del Yuta volcanic cones jutting up from the surrounding valley – reminders of the area's turbulent geologic past. Between these mountains is the Río Grande Wild & Scenic River gorge, carving through the landscape and revealing the basalt rock beneath the surface.

The human history of the landscape is as diverse as its features. Early prehistoric sites attest to the importance of this area for hunting and as a sacred site. Today the area is home to members of the Taos Pueblo, as well as descendants of both Hispanic and American settlers. Wildlife species – including bighorn sheep, deer, elk and antelope – bring both hunters and wildlife watchers, while the Río Grande and its tributaries provide blue ribbon trout fishing and other river recreation. Above it all soar the golden and bald eagles, prairie falcons, and other raptors.

H.R. 1241

H.R. 1241 designates nearly 236,000 acres of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as the Río Grande del Norte NCA. Each of the NCAs designated by Congress and managed by the BLM is unique. For the most part, however, they have certain critical elements, which include withdrawal from the public land, mining and mineral leasing laws; off-highway vehicle use limitations; and language that charges the Secretary of the Interior with allowing only those uses that further the purposes for which the NCA is established. Furthermore, NCA designations should not diminish the protections that currently apply to the lands. Section 3 of the bill honors these principles, and we support the NCA's designation.

Section 4 of the H.R. 1241 designates two wilderness areas on BLM-managed lands within the NCA – the proposed 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and the 8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness. Both of these areas meet the definitions of wilderness. They are largely untouched by humans, have outstanding opportunities for solitude and contain important geological,

biological and scientific features – criteria outlined in the Wilderness Act of 1964. We support both of these wilderness designations as well.

Conclusion

H.R. 1241 is the product of many years of discussions and collaboration with the local community, stakeholders, and other interested parties. It protects both the valuable resources of the area and the way of life in this unique area of northern New Mexico.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 1241.