

**Statement of
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Deputy Assistant Secretary
Land & Minerals Management
Department of the Interior
Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
S. 874, El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 874, El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act. The Department of the Interior supports S. 874, which designates the nearly 236,000-acre El Río Grande Del Norte National Conservation Area (NCA) in northern New Mexico as well as two wilderness areas within the NCA.

Background

The proposed El 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 descendents 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.

S. 874

S. 874 designates nearly 236,000 acres of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as El 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 S. 874 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

Senator Bingaman's bill 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 S. 874.