

**Statement of
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Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
S. 241, Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Act
April 25, 2013**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 241, the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act. On March 25, 2013, President Obama designated the Río Grande del Norte National Monument on 242,000 acres of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in northern New Mexico. This designation closely mirrors the National Conservation Area (NCA) designation in S. 241. However, section 4 of S. 241 also includes the designation of two wilderness areas within the new Río Grande del Norte National Monument – the proposed 13,320-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and 8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness. The Department supports the designation of these two new wilderness areas.

Background

The Río Grande del Norte National Monument lies north of Taos on the border with Colorado and straddles New Mexico's Taos and Río Arriba Counties. Rising in stark contrast from the monument's broad expanse, the Cerro de la Olla, Cerro San Antonio, and Cerro del Yuta volcanic cones provide visible reminders of the area's volatile past. Between these mountains, the dramatic gorge of the Río Grande Wild & Scenic River is carved into the landscape, revealing the dark basalt beneath the surface of the Taos plateau.

The proposed Cerro del Yuta Wilderness has at its centerpiece a symmetrical volcanic dome soaring to over 10,000 feet in altitude. Covered by ponderosa, Douglas fir, aspen, and spruce on the north side, and pinyon and juniper on the south side, the mountain provides important habitat for wildlife, including the herds of elk that draw hunters to the area. The volcanic dome provides an outstanding opportunity for peak climbing and the forested slopes create a strong sense of solitude.

The proposed Río San Antonio Wilderness consists of a flat plain bisected by the Río San Antonio. This grassland plain is dotted with occasional juniper, while the river sits two-hundred feet below the surface of the plateau at the bottom of a rugged gorge, the depths of which provide a microclimate for riparian vegetation, Douglas fir, and spruce. Visitors can find outstanding opportunities for solitude as they explore the gorge, which abruptly drops out of sight from the rest of the area. Protecting these characteristics will help to ensure that tourists will continue to visit the area, bringing economic benefits to the local community.

S. 241, Section 4

S.241 (section 4) designates two wilderness areas on BLM-managed lands within the new national monument—the proposed 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and 8,000-acre Río

San Antonio Wilderness. Both of these areas meet the definition of wilderness outlined in the Wilderness Act of 1964: they are largely untouched by humans, have outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation, are over 5,000 acres in size, and contain important geological, biological, and scientific features. We support the designation of these areas as wilderness. The BLM would be happy to work with the Sponsor and the Committee to create a new map for the legislation reflecting both the existing national monument and the two proposed wilderness areas.

Conclusion

President Obama's designation of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument was a tribute to both the area's extraordinary value and the steadfast support for protecting this magnificent place. The Department supports S.241 in its designation of some of the new national monument's wildest lands as wilderness.