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# UPDATE | Biden Calls For Withdrawal Of Federal Lands Around Chaco From Energy Exploration

By [Kurt Repanshek](#) - November 15th, 2021



President Biden was expected Monday to call for a moratorium on new oil and gas exploration around Chaco Culture National Historical Park/NPS file

*Editor's note: This updates with reaction from various groups.*

President Biden's call Monday for [Chaco Culture National Historical Park](#) in New Mexico to be protected from new oil and gas exploration through the withdrawal of that activity from federal lands within a 10-mile radius of the park drew praise from conservation groups and some politicians.

The president made that announcement during the Biden-Harris administration's first White House Tribal Nations Summit. It will spur the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to begin the process for such removal for a period of 20 years, Interior Department officials announced.

"Chaco Canyon is a sacred place that holds deep meaning for the Indigenous peoples whose ancestors lived, worked, and thrived in that high desert community," said Interior Secretary Deb Haaland. "Now is the time to consider more enduring protections for the living landscape that is Chaco, so that we can pass on this rich cultural legacy to future generations. I value and appreciate the many tribal leaders, elected officials, and stakeholders who have persisted in their work to conserve this special area."

Located at the end of a 20-mile washboard road, the national historical park with its focal point of the 600-room Pueblo Bonito is decidedly out of the way. What the park preserves is a remarkable setting that flourished as an Ancestral Puebloan trade, religious, and political center between 850 AD and 1250 AD.

*The highly organized large-scale structures, featuring multi-story construction and sophisticated coursed masonry, illustrate the increasing complexity of Chaco social structure, which distinguished itself within the regional culture of the ancestral Pueblo and dominated the area for more than four centuries. The high incidence of storage areas indicate the probability that the Chacoans played a central economic role, and the great size and unusual features of the ceremonial kivas suggest that complex religious ceremony may have been significant in their lives. -- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.*

"Today's actions by the president demonstrate a welcome and dramatic change in attitude towards the Indigenous people of this country," said U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee. "After four years of being ignored and witnessing sacred sites being desecrated, it is reassuring to see President Biden moving forward with the promises to Indian Country he campaigned on by acting to protect the sacred site of Chaco Canyon, as well as prioritizing the safety of Indigenous women and girls. Today's executive actions are a promising foundation to build a new standard for dialogue between tribal nations and the federal government."

At the [National Parks Conservation Association](#), President and CEO Theresa Pierno said the "[T]he Greater Chaco landscape is a culturally important area that extends far beyond the existing national park site's boundaries. President Biden and Secretary Haaland's decision to safeguard this beautiful and world-famous sacred land from damaging new oil and gas drilling is an important step toward protecting the region's culturally important lands, communities, and climate."

“Having visited Chaco just a few short weeks ago,” added Pierno, “I was reminded just how special this land is. You feel the vastness of the landscape and sacredness of the site. And that is something worth protecting now, and for generations to come. NPCA has worked for years alongside Indigenous communities to defend this historic landscape and today’s decision is an important step in ensuring these sacred places are preserved.”

An NPCA board member who is a member of the Pueblo of Acoma with direct ties to Chaco said past oil exploration “has desecrated parts of this sacred landscape.”

“These broader and long-lasting protections will finally preserve a far greater amount of this world-famous region and ensure it remains a special place for Pueblos, tribes and nations for generations yet to come,” added Kurt Riley.

Also praising the president's announcement was the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, the National Wildlife Federation, Mountain Pact, the Vet Voice Foundation, and the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks.

“The stories and resources preserved at Chaco Culture National Historical Park have international significance and we applaud the Biden’s administration’s decision to consider a 20-year ban on oil and gas drilling near the park. This landscape and its irreplaceable natural and cultural resources must be protected,” said Phil Francis, chair of the Coalition.

“Oil and gas drilling on the doorstep of this park threatens ancient archaeological sites and irreplaceable cultural artifacts representing more than 12,000 years of human history in the Chaco Canyon area,” Francis continued. “It could also compromise the park’s incredible dark skies, adversely impact air quality, and place the region’s immense biodiversity at risk. We thank the administration for their plan to protect Chaco Culture National Historical Park. We urge them to move swiftly to enact more reforms of our country’s broken oil and gas leasing system, for the good of our communities and the continued protection of our national parks and public land as part of the America the Beautiful initiative.”

In the coming weeks, the BLM intends to publish a notice in the Federal Register that will commence a two-year segregation of the federal lands while the bureau conducts an environmental analysis and seeks public comment on the proposed administrative withdrawal. BLM will also initiate formal tribal consultation. The segregation and potential withdrawal would not affect existing valid leases or rights and would not apply to minerals owned by private, state, or tribal entities.

It was back in 2014 when the BLM began to consider opening lands near Chaco Culture for oil and gas leasing. In 2018 the agency dropped the plan, with then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke saying there was a need for more consultation with tribes to understand their concerns over how the sale could impact cultural sites. Last year the BLM resumed consideration of oil and gas exploration in the area and was looking to grant as many as 3,100 oil and gas wells there. Cultural groups, archaeologists, and environment and conservation groups protested that proposal, citing the spiritual

nature of the park and surrounding lands, as well as possible damage to ruins. The Navajo Nation has been highly critical of the proposal.

Secretary Haaland on Monday directed the Interior Department to undertake a broader assessment of the Greater Chaco cultural landscape to ensure that public land management better reflects the sacred sites, stories, and cultural resources in the region. Beginning in early 2022, the BLM and the Bureau of Indian Affairs will co-lead discussions with tribes, communities, elected officials, and interested parties to explore ways the Interior Department can manage existing energy development, honor sensitive areas important to Tribes, and build collaborative management frameworks toward a sustainable economic future for the region.

“Today’s announcement has been years in the making,” said BLM Director Tracy Stone-Manning. “We look forward to kicking off a broader regional conversation with the many people who care deeply about the Greater Chaco landscape on how we can best manage the cultural and natural values unique to this special place.”

Monday’s announcement builds on years of efforts by the Pueblos and tribes, local communities, advocates, and elected officials to protect the greater Chaco Canyon area. Most recently, Congress instituted a one-year pause on new federal oil and gas leasing within a 10-mile radius of the park, as well as appropriated funding for ethnographic studies in the surrounding region. The withdrawal process under consideration will be informed by the ongoing ethnographic studies. This effort also complements the existing joint BLM-BIA effort to update land management plans in the area.

Chaco Canyon is unique and is one of the world’s most culturally significant landscapes. Located in the high desert of northwest New Mexico, this valley served as the center of the Chacoan culture for a roughly 400-year span, from 850 - 1250. Today, some of Chaco Canyon is protected as Chaco Culture National Historical Park, which honors the landscape of mountains, mesas, and sacred places that have deep spiritual meaning to this day. The park and related areas were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, one of only two dozen sites in the United States.