



The Mountain Pact

June 30, 2023

Melanie Barnes, State Director
Bureau of Land Management (BLM) New Mexico State Office
301 Dinosaur Trail
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87508

Dear State Director Barnes,

The lands that are overseen by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) within New Mexico include some of the most stunning in the country, a fact that is reflected by [the many tracts that have been designated as National Conservation Lands](#). These National Monuments, National Scenic and Historic Trails, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and Wilderness Areas are important to all aspects of life within New Mexico as they hold cultural significance, provide recreational opportunities, contribute to the economy, and sustain the natural ecosystems that support a healthy environment. Access to natural landscapes has also been shown to have [positive impacts for both economies and human health](#).

As local elected officials within New Mexico, we would like to express our commitment to protecting these landscapes which provide so much to our communities. We commend BLM on recent agency guidance that prioritizes the health of public lands and encourage the BLM to continue to place conservation at the forefront of the rulemaking that will occur in 2023.

Public lands play a critical role in helping New Mexico remain the “land of enchantment.” Rural communities like those in Dona Ana, Otero, and Taos counties depend upon the world class hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities these lands provide, and our state’s culture, heritage and way-of-life are forever connected to these protected lands. The BLM manages 13.5 million acres in New Mexico, yet only 2.5% or just under 2 million acres are durably protected. Currently, there are BLM planning processes underway or upcoming in the Rio Puerco, Carlsbad, Farmington, and Tri-County field offices as well as Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument. These and other planning initiatives must include administrative protections like establishing new Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) if we are going to succeed in combating the climate and biodiversity crisis. The agency must use all its existing tools and authorities in these plans and others across the West to accelerate the scope and pace of conservation.

New Mexico’s public lands will continue to benefit from increased protections. We were thrilled to see that the [rules for the designation of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern \(ACEC\)](#) have been clarified so that this type of designation may be prioritized during the land use planning process. ACECs conserve cultural sites and scenic areas, and can help at-risk and endangered species recover. [This designation can also improve watershed quality](#), which is especially critical in the arid Southwest.

For protected landscapes, like ACECs, to be the most effective, they must exist within a network that connects them to other lands. We would therefore also like to express our appreciation for the [BLM’s recent guidance related to Habitat Connectivity on Public Lands](#). Connectivity across public lands is becoming even more important in the face of climate change, since [species survival may depend on migration](#).

We would like to endorse the [BLM's commitment to incorporate co-stewardship between the federal and tribal governments into the management practices overseeing these lands](#). Over 12% of New Mexico's population identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native. This is [the third largest statewide percentage of this population in the country](#), which makes truly meaningful collaboration between the federal government and Tribal Nations all the more important here.

Finally, in addition to the conservation efforts we've highlighted above, we also strongly encourage the BLM to use other existing tools to protect public lands across the state. In particular, we call your attention to designating new Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). Many of the iconic landscapes that define our state are protected as wilderness. The BLM has the authority to ensure that lands with wilderness character are administratively protected as WSAs and prioritizing WSA designations will ensure that we are able to permanently protect cherished lands now and into the future.

As 2023 progresses, we look forward to the BLM prioritizing the conservation of our shared public lands. With this in mind, we strongly encourage your work that emphasizes ecological integrity, preservation of vulnerable resources, and maintaining access to outdoor recreation.

Sincerely,

Council Member Tammy Fiebelkorn, City of Albuquerque, New Mexico
County Commissioner Eric Olivas, Bernalillo County, New Mexico
County Commissioner Harry Browne, Grant County, New Mexico
Council Member Johana Bencomo, City of Las Cruces, New Mexico
Council Member Becky Corran, City of Las Cruces, New Mexico
County Commissioner Hank Hughes, Santa Fe County, New Mexico
County Commissioner Anna Hansen, Santa Fe County, New Mexico
Council Member Darien Fernandez, Town of Taos, New Mexico
County Commissioner Shannon Reynolds, Doña Ana County, New Mexico