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BLM should enact a strong public lands rule

COMMENTARY ANNA HANSEN

By Anna Hansen Jun 30, 2023

The lands overseen by the Bureau of Land Management within New Mexico include some of the most stunning in the country. 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.

The BLM manages 13.5 million acres in New Mexico, yet only 2.5% are durably protected. New Mexico's public lands would benefit from increased protections, and as the chair of the Santa Fe County Commission, I commend the BLM on the announcement it will modernize management to promote healthy landscapes, abundant wildlife, clean drinking water and balanced decision-making. I thank the agency for holding a public meeting in Albuquerque.

This proposed "Public Land Rule" clarifies that conservation, which includes restoration and protection, is a multiple use within the agency's management framework on par with other uses such as development, and will ensure America's public lands can be managed to sustain their health, diversity and productivity for current and future generations.

Public lands play a critical role in helping New Mexico remain the Land of Enchantment. Our communities depend upon the world-class hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities these lands provide since our state's culture, heritage and way of life are forever connected to these protected lands.

BLM lands, like areas of critical environmental concern, 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.

Some local areas of concern in Santa Fe County have a rich history that can still be seen in the land itself. For example, the Caja del Rio contains a dense concentration of sacred Pueblo sites, structures, petroglyphs, irrigation systems and other Indigenous cultural resources. Recent history of the area also includes the passage of the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro through the area; Spanish land grant communities utilizing the land for centuries; and the continued use and direct connection of the area's Indigenous communities.

The cliffs of Diablo Canyon make for some of the best rock climbing in the region, and the diverse wildlife includes everything from elk and black bears to eagles and owls, with the riparian bosque along the Rio Grande and Santa Fe rivers containing a mix of piñon-juniper, grasslands, cactuses and sagebrush.

There is an urgency to protecting this area as it is subject to many time-sensitive threats like unregulated shooting, vandalism, illegal dumping and irresponsible and destructive off-roading. Sadly, recently many of the sacred petroglyphs in the Caja were vandalized. Increasing and coordinating a higher level of protection of this area is the only way to prevent this kind of destructive behavior and ensure the Caja is here for future generations.

There is strong support from businesses, Western congressional leaders and others for conservation to have equal footing within the BLM's mission of multiple use. I recently joined fellow New Mexican local elected officials on letters, including one with over 120 Western local elected officials, calling on the Biden administration to protect more BLM lands.

I commend BLM on its draft rule that prioritizes the conservation of wildlife and cultural resources and encourages tribal co-stewardship. I encourage the BLM to enact a strong final Public Lands Rule that helps us ensure public lands across the state are safeguarded now and in the future.

Visit tinyurl.com/5n8643uy to leave a comment by Wednesday.

Santa Fe County Commission Chair Anna Hansen writes on behalf of the Santa Fe County Commission