

## Santa Fe County pushing for more funds from U.S. lands

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- Oct 23, 2020 Updated Oct 24, 2020

Santa Fe County has joined other local governments throughout the West in pushing to receive a payment for protected federal lands within their jurisdictions.

County Commissioner Anna Hansen and City Councilor Renee Villarreal were among the nearly 70 local officials in 11 Western states who signed [a letter](#) urging congressional leaders to approve tacking on a “gateway community dividend” to the money the counties get every year as compensation for their federal lands yielding no local property taxes.

Congress created the payments in lieu of taxes, or PILT, in 1976.

A consortium of Western counties wants to supplement the next PILT with a payment for their federally protected lands, such as wilderness areas, national parks, and wild and scenic rivers.

For Santa Fe County, the dividend would add about \$110,000 to the roughly \$800,000 it gets in yearly PILT.

“Our protected public lands are tremendous assets to our communities and support our growing outdoor recreation economies,” the letter says. “However, increased visitation to our public lands has strained the infrastructure that accommodates these visitors.”

To help these tourist areas — or gateway communities — cover the additional costs, Congress should expand the PILT program to include the proposed dividend, the letter says.

Villarreal agreed.

“Our public lands are an important asset for the health and well-being of our city and county residents, as well as for our outdoor recreation and eco-tourism economies,” Villarreal said. “Now is even more critical of a time to support this because we have seen increased visitation on our public lands from both locals and tourists due to COVID-19.”

Although the city wouldn’t get a direct financial boost, it would benefit from having the national forests surrounding Santa Fe to be better maintained, she said, noting that these lands have suffered from years of deferred maintenance.

With a PILT, a county received roughly \$3 for every acre of federal land in its jurisdiction last year — and this dividend would be about \$1.50 per acre of protected federal land, said Jenny Rowland-Shea, senior policy analyst for public lands at the Center for American Progress.

Santa Fe County has 305,430 acres of federal land, of which 79,643 acres are protected, she said.

The letter says the dividend would offer greater incentive to protect the environment on public lands, including wildlife and their habitat.

Hansen said the money would give the county additional funds to enhance its open space program and outdoor recreation. And she agreed that it could fund increased environmental protection.

“Our wildlife in New Mexico is at risk along with our waterways, which are facing many threats,” Hansen said. “These funds will help us invest in programs that will protect our wildlife and the health and safety of our citizens.”

The money also would provide local law enforcement with more resources to police the “bad actors” who use public lands as shooting areas, she said, adding that federal agencies often fail to monitor, regulate and clean up the sites.