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Commentary: Sportsmen support **wilderness** legislation, thank Bingaman

Sanford Schemnitz, John Moen, Noel Cooley and John Cornell / For the Sun-News

Our canyons, grasslands, and mountains are tough, rugged, and spectacular. It takes time to get to know them -- hours spent afield watching quail, deer, or just a beautiful landscape view. As sportsmen, we've spent many years appreciating and utilizing both the beauty and the bounty of local lands like the Organ Mountains, Broad Canyon, and the West Potrillo Mountains.

Yet, while these mountains and grasslands surrounding our ever-enlarging city are rugged, they are also very fragile.

Those of us who have spent years -- indeed, decades -- exploring the vast expanses of our open spaces surrounding the sister cities of Las Cruces and El Paso are very much aware of that fragility.

Many different users, including sportsmen, have appreciated the bounty that exists here. We have also realized that the well-being of these same areas is not guaranteed.

As recently as the 1980s, there were no houses, other than a couple of ranches, between A-Mountain and the Organs. So much has changed in the last three decades.

The same fate has occurred in the valley between Las Cruces and Hatch and between Las Cruces and El Paso. Human civilization, and the stresses that it brings to other life that share this landscape, slowly creeps toward and encroaches upon them.

So four years ago, when we heard that a group of folks -- including conservationists -- wanted to designate **wilderness** in these local areas to ensure they would stay as they were, we were interested, but also skeptical. Similar efforts in the 1980s and 1990s had not met with success.

Some sportsmen were concerned about how the plans would be crafted and what their effects would be.

But our years afield convinced us of the urgent need to protect good quality habitat and preserve our natural lands for current and future generations.

We believed that in the fight to preserve these special places, this time would be different -- largely because Sen. Jeff Bingaman and his staff stepped up to the plate.

They came to our community and listened. They started out with open minds, eager to hear local ideas and opinions.

With an eye for balance, many local groups collectively went to work with the senator's staff to look for real and lasting solutions to protect our natural public lands.

Land conservation is complex, and requires leadership at all levels. Sen. Bingaman, through time-consuming and thoughtful work, found real compromise and balance. Several years of give-and-take and field trips out on the land produced an important milestone: a proposal to protect many of our most important lands in Doña Ana County.

We are proud to have been a part of this process.

The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks **Wilderness** Act, introduced by New Mexico Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, will protect these areas and their natural habitats and resources in perpetuity --essentially "locking in" such activities as hunting, hiking, horseback riding, camping, and basic family recreation, for all time.

That protection will serve the greater good of those of us who wish to enjoy these places and pass them down to our children's children.

That is the key to the puzzle -- finding a balance between providing opportunity for us, as citizens, to seek recreation within these areas but, at the same time, conserving them as reservoirs of clean water and air and as habitat for wildlife.

While the new bill does not include all of our suggestions, nor 100 percent of any other group's requests, we believe it is balanced. Sen. Bingaman, Sen. Udall and their staffs did tremendous work in reaching out to the many varied interests and stakeholders.

We feel fortunate to have had their leadership at the helm steering this historic legislation and making this long-sought-after goal of protection possible.

As sportsmen, we join with many other members of the larger community to encourage the New Mexico delegation to get behind this important conservation bill.

Move the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks **Wilderness** Act through Congress and to the president's desk with good speed.

Sanford Schemnitz is chairman of the Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen. John Moen is president of the Southwest NM Chapter of Quail Unlimited. Noel Cooley is past president of the Do?a Ana County Associated Sportsmen. John Cornell is with the New Mexico Wildlife Federation.

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Hearing set for wilderness protection bill

By Diana M. Alba / Sun-News reporter
Posted: 10/06/2009 12:00:00 AM MDT

LAS CRUCES - A bill aimed at protecting the Organ Mountains and three other groups of mountains in Dona Ana County is slated for its first congressional hearing this week.

The bill, sponsored by U.S. Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, both D-N.M., is set to be considered Thursday by a subpanel of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

The Organ Mountains- Desert Peaks Wilderness Act would create 259,000 acres of federally designated wilderness - the highest level of land protection granted by the federal government. Also, it would create another 100,850 acres of national conservation area, a less-restrictive designation.

In addition to land around the Organ Mountains, acreage near the Sierra de las Uvas, Robledo and Potrillo mountains would gain protection.

Jude McCartin, spokeswoman for Bingaman, said the goal is for the larger committee to vote on the bill before the end of the year. She said the senator is hopeful the legislation will clear the Senate by the end of its two-year session in 2010.

Scheduled to testify are Do-a Ana County Commissioner Oscar Vásquez-Butler, a supporter of the legislation, and Jerry Schickedanz, chairman of People for Preserving Our Western Heritage, a group that has opposed creating wilderness.

Supporters have said the bill is needed to protect land from future development, while opponents, including ranchers, have expressed concerns about wilderness hindering access to the land.

Vásquez-Butler said he was invited by Bingaman to testify at the hearing. He said the cost of his trip will be split by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and his county travel fund because he plans to conduct other county business while he's in Washington, D.C. He said he has always backed protecting open space and water quality, the reason he's supporting the wilderness bill.

"My concern was that we were losing the quality of life that brought me to the Las Cruces area - the wonderment of the Organs, the history of the Robledos, and everything that ensures the habitat will be here not only now but for future generations," he said.

The county commission and town of Mesilla have passed resolutions in favor of the wilderness bill. The Las Cruces City Council OK'd its own resolution Monday.

Schickedanz said he plans to elaborate on concerns of his group, including that the opposition isn't made up of a handful of ranchers but includes 791 businesses and other groups from the community. He repeated a concern from the group that the legislation might hinder law enforcement access to any protected lands near the border.

Schickedanz said his group isn't opposed to protecting the Organ Mountains, but "we just feel there are other ways to protect the lands," such as through existing administrative procedures.

"You can provide some of the same protections, but not as severe as locking the lands up for access," he said. McCartin said the senator's office attempted to address issues raised by ranchers through excluding roads and water tanks and other measures.

"We have a whole list of things we added to the bill as a result of conversations with them," she said. "We believe we've improved the bill in a way that addressed their concerns."

Vásquez-Butler said he plans to lobby on behalf of the county's pending applications for federal economic stimulus money and projects on its infrastructure improvement list.

The hearing starts at 12:30 p.m. local time. McCartin said the testimony will be Webcast at

<http://energy.senate.gov/public>.

Diana M. Alba can be reached at dalba@lcsun-news.com; (575) 541-5443.



State of New Mexico

Office of the Governor

Bill Richardson
Governor

October 6, 2009

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman
United States Senate
703 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Bingaman:

I am honored to support a historic land conservation measure that has been many years in the making: the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act. I appreciate the leadership that you and Senator Udall demonstrated by introducing this important legislation to protect many of the most important public lands in Southern New Mexico. From the jagged spires of the Organ Mountains to the petroglyphs in Broad Canyon, the Act will protect approximately 259,000 acres of wilderness, and an additional 100,000 acres as two new National Conservation Areas. When enacted, these protected lands will showcase some of the finest ecosystems and vistas that New Mexico's Chihuahuan Desert has to offer, while making an important contribution to our country's wilderness and National Landscape Conservation System.

This legislation has also brought together an impressive and diverse group of citizens to help develop this proposal, with organizations such as the Hispano Chamber of Commerce de Las Cruces, Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen, and the League of Woman Voters working hand in hand to push for its development. Through a multi-year process, important agreements and compromises have been made to facilitate border security, flood control, and access for all citizens. The end result, the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, truly represents the best of community cooperation and legislative leadership. As Governor of New Mexico, I am honored to lend my strong support for the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, and encourage Congress to support its passage into law.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Richardson".

Bill Richardson
Governor of New Mexico

For immediate release
Gallegos
Oct. 7, 2009

Contact: Gilbert

(505) 476-2217

Governor Bill Richardson Announces Support for Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act

SANTA FE -- Governor Bill Richardson announced his support today for the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, which was introduced by New Mexico Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall.

“I applaud the leadership of Senator Bingaman and Senator Udall who introduced this important legislation to protect many of the most important public lands in Southern New Mexico,” said Governor Richardson. “From the jagged spires of the Organ Mountains to the petroglyphs in Broad Canyon, this bill will protect some of the finest ecosystems and vistas that New Mexico’s Chihuahuan Desert has to offer, while making an important contribution to our country’s wilderness and National Landscape Conservation System.”

The act (S. 1689) creates wilderness and conservation areas that would provide for continued public use while protecting 259,000 acres of wilderness and 100,000 acres of National Conservation Area (NCA). The bill also releases 16,350 acres along the southern border that had previously been designated as so-called "Wilderness Study Area". This will provide increased flexibility for border law enforcement.

A fact sheet from Senator Bingaman’s office is available at http://bingaman.senate.gov/policy/organmntns_factsheet.pdf.

Obama puts support behind wilderness measure

By Steve Ramirez Sun-News reporter
Posted: 10/10/2009 12:00:00 AM MDT

LAS CRUCES - Support for the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act continues to grow, as the Obama administration has now offered its support to the legislation intended to protect the mountain range just east of Las Cruces and other scenic areas in Doña Ana County.

"Passage of this legislation will ensure that generations of New Mexicans and all Americans will be able to witness a golden eagle soar over the Sierra de las Uvas, hike the landmark Organ Mountains, or hunt in the volcanic outcroppings of the Potrillo Mountains," said Marcilynn A. Burke, deputy director for the Bureau of Land Management. "We welcome this opportunity to enhance protection for some of America's treasured landscapes."

The Obama administration endorsed the legislation at a U.S. Senate hearing Thursday in Washington, D.C. Resolutions in support of the legislation written by Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, both D-N.M., to protect the Organs have already been adopted by the city of Las Cruces, town of Mesilla and Do-a Ana County governments. Gov. Bill Richardson has also thrown in his support for the bill.

"This bill already had strong local support, and now we have the backing of the Obama administration," said Bingaman, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "The Organ Mountains provide one of the most stunning views in New Mexico, and we are now on our way to preserving them for future enjoyment."

The bill would create wilderness and conservation areas that would provide for continued public use while protecting the Organ's granite peaks and volcanic cinder cones of the Potrillo Mountains, also in Do-a Ana County.

"I want to thank Chairman Bingaman for allowing me to participate in the hearing for this important legislation," said Udall. "The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act will protect thousands of acres of desert prairie and rugged mountain. From the jagged basalt lava flows of the Cinder Cone Wilderness, to the roaming hawks and scrambling javelinas of the Robledo Mountains, this unique piece of southern New Mexico has abundant natural and economic value, and deserves protection for generations to come."

The legislation would protect 259,000 acres of wilderness and 100,000 acres of National Conservation Area. These areas would be managed in ways that protect the landscape from development while preserving current uses - such as hunting and grazing.

The bill also releases 16,350 acres along the southern border that had previously been designated as so-called "Wilderness Study Area." This will provide increased flexibility for border law enforcement.

"I applaud the leadership of Sen. Bingaman and Sen. Udall who introduced this important legislation to protect many of the most important public lands in southern New Mexico," Richardson said. "From the jagged spires of the Organ Mountains to the petroglyphs in Broad Canyon, this bill will protect some of the finest ecosystems and vistas that New Mexico's Chihuahuan Desert has to offer, while making an important contribution to our country's wilderness and National Landscape Conservation System."

Oscar Butler, vice chairman of the county Board of Commissioners, and Jerry Schickedanz, chairman of the group People for Preserving Our Western Heritage, were invited to testify at the hearing. While Schickedanz

said he certainly supports efforts to preserve the Organs, he and others are opposed to the limitations that could be placed on ranchers and other users of the wilderness areas.

"There are other ways to protect the lands," Schickedanz said. "It's premature to put this on the fast track for approval without a public hearing."

But others, such as Joel Hoffman, of Organ, are excited about the bill.

"I'm very happy to hear this legislation ... has come from four years worth of hard work. Now is the time to act, let's do this."

Steve Ramirez can be reached at sramirez@lcsun-news.com; (575) 541-5452.

Organ Mountains support

- The city of Las Cruces, town of Mesilla and Do-a Ana County governments have all approved resolutions in support of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act.
- The legislation was introduced into the U.S. Senate in mid September.
- Gov. Bill Richardson is also supporting the legislation.
- The bill would create wilderness and conservation areas that would be available for public use.

Mayor John Cook backs resolution to protect New Mexico wilderness

By David Burge / El Paso Times

Publication: [LexisNexis](#)

Date: [Monday, October 19 2009](#)

EL PASO -- A bid by New Mexico's two U.S. senators to protect the Organ Mountains and other scenic areas in Southern New Mexico could help El Paso, too.

If approved, it would preserve thousands of acres that are an easy day trip from El Paso and could create new opportunities for hiking, proponents said.

Mayor John Cook wants the City Council to support a bill introduced in Congress last month by Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall by passing a resolution Tuesday.

The Democratic senators are trying to designate 259,000 acres in Doña Ana County as wilderness, and another 100,000 acres as national conservation areas. The protected areas would include the Organ, Potrillo and Robledo mountains.

Bingaman chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. A subcommittee has already held a hearing for the bill.

"These mountains connect us all, and it makes a policy statement on what's important to El Paso and the council," Cook said. "I don't know if it will be an impetus for tourism, but it will make sure these mountains are preserved in the future."

New Mexico state Rep. Jeff Steinborn, D-Las Cruces, said these lands can provide recreational opportunities for El Pasoans.

"Some of these lands are closer to El Paso than Las Cruces," said Steinborn, who is also the Southern New Mexico director for the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. "The proposed Potrillo Mountain wilderness area, if enacted, would be the fourth largest wilderness area in New Mexico."

The bill could protect the area from development while preserving its current uses, which include hiking, cattle grazing and hunting, Bingaman spokeswoman Jude McCartin said.

"It's a very special place in New Mexico," she said. "The community has been very interested in protecting it."

El Paso and Las Cruces have always had a close relationship, McCartin said, and many El Pasoans visit Doña Ana County to go hiking.

City Reps. Steve Ortega and Beto O'Rourke have both hiked in the Organ Mountains outside of Las Cruces and both support the resolution.

Ortega said El Paso could use nearby outdoor destinations, such as the Organ Mountains, Hueco Tanks State Park, and the Guadalupe Mountains and Carlsbad Caverns national parks, to market itself as a gateway to outdoor activities.

"We're located in a great location for those interested in outdoor adventures," Ortega said.

O'Rourke said the proposed resolution shows the mayor and council are thinking regionally, not just about El Paso.

"Our open space and wilderness areas, including the Franklin and Organ mountains, are among our greatest assets, and we should do everything to protect them," he said.

Las Cruces, Mesilla and Doña Ana County have passed similar resolutions supporting the bill, which would also remove about 16,000 acres along the New Mexico-Mexico border from another wilderness study area.

Removing the designation would provide increased flexibility for border law enforcement efforts, McCartin said.

David Burge may be reached at dburge@elpasotimes.com; 546-6126.

October 21, 2009

Section: News

Article ID: 13606695

BLM withholds some land from auction

Sun-News report

ALBUQUERQUE - Thousands of acres will be offered up this week at the Bureau of Land Management's regional oil and gas lease sale, but the agency has pulled back a dozen parcels in New Mexico that are near a national park and proposed **wilderness**. The agency says it's waiting for guidance from officials in Washington, D.C., on whether there should be a buffer between energy development and nearly 369,000 acres in southern New Mexico that the state's U.S. senators want to protect as **wilderness** and a national conservation area.

Conservationists had complained that four parcels were only seven miles from the proposed Organ Mountains and Desert Peaks **wilderness** area. In northern New Mexico, the Hopi tribe of Arizona has concerns about eight parcels not far from Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

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El Paso City Council resolution backs New Mexico wilderness measure

By David Burge / For the Sun-News

Posted: 10/21/2009 05:03:46 AM MDT

EL PASO -- The City Council gave moral support Tuesday to a proposal that would protect thousands of acres of wilderness and other scenic areas in Southern New Mexico. Council members voted 6-0 for a resolution backing a bill introduced last month by New Mexico's Democratic U.S. senators, Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall.

The legislation would designate 259,000 acres in Doña Ana County as wilderness and another 100,000 acres as national conservation areas. Uses such as hiking, hunting and cattle grazing would still be allowed.

Protected areas would include the Organ, Potrillo and Robledo mountains.

"If you've ever hiked in the Organ Mountains, you know why New Mexico is called the Land of Enchantment," Mayor John Cook said.

Cook sponsored the resolution because he said it was important for the city to weigh in on an issue of regional importance.

Nathan Small, a Las Cruces City Council member and conservation coordinator for the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, attended the meeting. Small said the bill would allow the region to continue to grow while protecting some its most spectacular natural resources.

The new designations could also bring additional funding for these scenic areas and possibly boost tourism, Small said.

The bill also would release about 16,000 acres along the New Mexico-Mexico border from a wilderness study area. This would give border law-enforcement additional flexibility, Small said. El Paso city Rep. Carl L. Robinson

Protecting wilderness: Council resolution gets us thinking

El Paso Times Staff

Posted: 10/22/2009 12:00:00 AM MDT

Sometimes we chide City Council for taking time to hereby resolve something. A resolution? Big deal! The city's intent to be against the border fence is one. It did nothing to stop the fence. Here's one that will also wind up in the "resolutions" folder in a file cabinet, but it's an example of how a resolution can get people to think.

This week, City Council gave a ditto to a bill in Congress that would protect thousands of acres of wilderness and scenic areas near Las Cruces.

The bill is meant to protect the outdoors, and our views of it, from becoming what it looks like when El Pasoans look at our mountains. Development has gone quite far up the foothills. There will be no scenic postcards printed for Crazy Cat Mountain.

Long ago, we sold mountain land to private investors. And in Texas the laws read that if you own it, you can probably build on it. The city is just now trying to update building codes, what with Storm 2006 having wreaked \$200 million in damages. Part of the cause was development higher up messing with the natural flow of water to the Rio Grande. That flow, in some cases, wound up in somebody's kitchen down below.

This bill for New Mexico, introduced by Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, would designate 359,000 acres in Doña Ana County as wilderness or national conservation areas. Some of that land -- for hikers and such -- is closer to El Paso than it is to Las Cruces.

This bill would not stifle the much-needed, economy-boosting building industry. There is plenty of land around here on which to build new neighborhoods. Plenty. This bill will simply preserve the outdoors for everyone, not just those who can afford to live high on a mountain.

Good resolution, City Council.

NM Lawmakers Looking To Protect Organ Mountains

[Phil Anaya](#)-KFOX News Reporter

Posted: 4:55 pm MDT October 20, 2009 Updated: 5:52 pm MDT October 20, 2009

LAS CRUCES, N.M. -- There are many people trying to protect the Organ Mountains ranging from sportsmen, business owners, conservationists and elected officials. The "Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act" is being pushed in Washington, D.C., by New Mexico Sens. Jeff Bingaman and [Tom Udall](#). If passed, the measure will protect almost 400,000 acres of public land in Dona Ana County, and would ensure the protection of watersheds, hunting, recreational opportunities as well as cultural resources like petroglyphs. With both the city of Las Cruces and Dona Ana County growing at a fast pace, many residents seem to be excited about the bill. Even the El Paso City Council jumped onboard Tuesday in support of the bill.

"City of [El Paso](#) is a key partner, we have so much in common, we share many of the same areas, share the people who travel back and forth," said Councilman Nathan Small of Las Cruces attending El Paso City Council. "We felt it was very important because the council has been so forward thinking to come down here and unanimously support the desert wilderness act."

The bill has been introduced in [Congress](#) and just waits to be moved through the legislative process.

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10/23/09 Guest Column

Wilderness is common, sacred ground in religious tradition

By Paul J. Citrin, Jim Lehman, James Large, Sam Ritchie and Joe Whitley

For the Las Cruces Bulletin

Wilderness is sacred in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. Elijah flees to the wilderness in fear and despair, and finds the "still, small voice" of God. John the Baptist came out of the wilderness to proclaim Christ. Jesus follows the Spirit into the wilderness where he overcomes Satan's temptation. Mohammed receives the sacred word of Allah in a wilderness cave.

Many of us have gone into parts of the great American wilderness to renew what is most precious to us. We want to reconnect with nature. We yearn for a measure of solitude and distance from our crowded lives. As we hear the sounds of birds, water and wind in the wilderness, we more clearly attune with the beat of our own hearts. The time we take in the wilderness yields to us life renewed physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Because we know what wilderness has meant for our ancestors and for us, and hoping our children and their children also will be enriched by wilderness experience, we urge citizens of New Mexico to support the Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, introduced and sponsored by Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall.

This bill designates approximately 259,000 acres of Doña Ana County as wilderness, and almost another 100,000 acres as a National Conservation Area.

This bill protects wild and open space for the benefit of current and future residents of New Mexico, including the Organ Mountains, the Doña Ana Mountains, Robledo Mountains, Broad Canyon and the East Potrillo Mountains. Such preservation will also draw people from around the nation and the world to partake in the outdoor wonders our wilderness offers.

The magnet of our protected open space will also be an economic blessing for this region. While many people will enjoy hiking, camping, birding, horseback riding and hunting, livestock grazing will continue to be permitted in wilderness areas.

An ancient legend portrays God showing Adam and Eve around the Garden of Eden. As God points out the wonders of Eden, Adam and Eve are given a warning.

God said, "See how fine and excellent is my creation. Do not spoil it, for if you do, there will be no one to restore it after you."

The common ground of our Christian and Jewish traditions is the ground: the land, the water, the trees, the mountains and valleys and all of their natural inhabitants. In pristine wilderness, we have an environment to renew our ties to that which is holy in our lives.

The Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks Wilderness Act is a crucial vehicle by which all citizens can put into practice our most precious values. We commend Bingaman and Udall for their leadership on wilderness legislation. We encourage you to communicate with our legislators to express support for the Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks Wilderness Act.

Rabbi Paul J. Citrin is a rabbi at Temple Beth-El; Jim Lehman is pastor at Holy Family Ecumenical Catholic Church; James Large is pastor at St. Paul's United Methodist Church; Sam Ritchie is pastor at Wellspring Church; and Joe Whitley is pastor at St. Paul's United Methodist Church.

The time we take in the wilderness yields to us life renewed ...