

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 6, 2016

COMMITTEES:
ARMED SERVICES
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
INTELLIGENCE
JOINT ECONOMIC

The Hon. Ryan Zinke
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C St NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

As you review the status of the Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks National Monument, I wanted to share with you the extensive public engagement and debate on the management of this landscape. For decades, southern New Mexico residents have worked to protect these places. The monument designation three years ago was the culmination of generations of work by local residents. I hope you consider this history when conducting your review.

Shortly after the Wilderness Act of 1964 was signed into law, establishing a new level of legislatively directed management protection for unique federal public lands, local Doña Ana County residents determined that areas of the Organ Mountains were deserving of wilderness protection and began working toward their designation under the new law. By the mid-1970s, the West Potrillo Mountains were found to contain one of the largest expanses of undisturbed Chihuahuan desert grasslands and were also determined to deserve consideration for wilderness designation. Moving forward, local support for these areas and other special wild lands within the county to be included in the national wilderness preservation system, or other protective status such as national conservation areas, continued to grow.

In 1969, the New Mexico Wilderness Study Committee was formed by a small group of citizens interested in protecting public lands around Las Cruces. Shortly thereafter, in 1971, the U.S. Department of the Interior took the first steps to protect some of these lands with the designation of the 27,167 acre Organ Mountains Recreation Lands and began to develop a Management Plan for these lands.

With the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), Congress expressed its intent to change the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) from an agency primarily overseeing the disposal of public lands to one with a broader role of stewardship, including the protection in perpetuity of special landscapes as wilderness areas. FLPMA directed a 15-year study and identification of wilderness study areas (WSAs) by the BLM for submission to Congress for its consideration as to whether they should be designated as wilderness. This multi-year review process allowed for significant public involvement and comment and, in New Mexico, this was exemplified by the citizen involvement and inventory of BLM managed lands conducted by the New Mexico BLM Wilderness Coalition.

The coalition's findings were put forth in its 230-page proposal, "Wildlands," published in 1987. Within Doña Ana County, the "Wildlands" study recommended an enlargement of most of the WSAs previously proposed by the state BLM office—totaling some 427,000 acres as eligible for wilderness designation.

By the end of the 1970s, the Las Cruces Field Office of the BLM had completed its first draft proposal for WSAs in the area, and released its decisions on WSAs to the public in the late 1980. And, in 1984, BLM designated the 8,947 acre Organ Mountains Scenic Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

By 1987, interest in protecting the lands around Las Cruces continued to grow, and the book-form of the results of a citizen inventory of BLM lands, "Wildlands," was released—documenting the New Mexico BLM Wilderness Coalition's statewide proposal for wilderness protection on BLM lands in response to the 1986 BLM Statewide Wilderness Study revised draft. The following year, another group supporting protected federal lands, the Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen, was founded. And, in 1989, BLM Las Cruces District Office released the Organ Mountains Resource Management Plan, which was quickly followed by their recommendation of establishing an Organ Mountains National Conservation Area (NCA). That same year, Dave Foreman and Howie Wolke published "The Big Outside," which identified and recognized the importance of large national wilderness areas and WSAs, including the West Portillo Mountains outside of Las Cruces.

Two years later, in 1991, the New Mexico State office of BLM released the New Mexico Wilderness Study Report, fulfilling the requirements of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act to make final WSA recommendations to Congress by the end of 1991. The proposal for WSAs submitted to Congress pursuant to FLPMA fell short of the citizen proposal for wilderness consideration, only recommended 181,000 acres for inclusion in the Wilderness Preservation System. In 1993, BLM suggested two small additions in the Organ Mountains, bringing the final total of proposed wilderness by BLM to 193,000 acres. In light of the relatively small amount of acreage recommended for wilderness and Congressional inaction even on these recommendations, citizen groups coalesced to form the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance (NMWA) in 1997. The new organization's first steps were to re-inventory all federally managed public lands in New Mexico.

In 2004, as a result of the new inventory, NMWA began a formal campaign for wilderness designation in Doña Ana County. This "Citizen's Proposal" called for the establishment of a 429,0090 acre National Conservation Area (NCA) for the Organ Mountains and Desert Peaks areas, with core wilderness areas of some 325,000 acres within its boundaries. By late 2005, then Senator Pete Domenici announced his intention to introduce legislation that would establish the original 181,000 areas identified by BLM as wilderness but would de-designate other WSAs and provide for the sale and private development of approximately 65,000 acres of existing BLM lands. This proposal met with immediate resistance from local interests, with a poll in January 2006 showing that citizens clearly rejected the land disposal provision in the Senator's draft legislation and a clear preference for the larger Wilderness Alliance proposal. The Doña Ana County Commission and local city councils (Las Cruces, Mesilla, Hatch, and Sunland Park) each passed resolutions consistent with the public polling results in support of protecting more public lands within the county.

Overall support for protecting large swaths of Doña Ana County continued to grow, as a broad coalition of hunters, local businesses, and various citizen groups committed to the permanent protection of Doña Ana public lands from development and extractive uses. Shortly thereafter, the Doña Ana County Wilderness Coalition was formed (later to be known by several names) in support of wilderness designation and, eventually, evolving from wilderness advocacy to a broader support for a national monument. In the meantime, leaders within the Doña Ana County Commission and the Las Cruces City Council expressed their support for broader wilderness protection to include the WSAs in Broad Canyon, East Potrillos, as well as lesser protections for the Organ foothills, Doña Ana Mountains, and Tortuga Mountains.

At Senator Domenici's request in 2006, the City of Las Cruces began a six-month series of public meetings and stakeholder negotiations seeking a compromise that the Senator could support with new legislation. Bringing together urban and rural interests, business and neighborhood groups, sportsmen and conservationists, motorized and "quiet" recreation enthusiasts, the group was able to generally agree that they opposed large-scale land development for the region, no consensus was reached on how much land should be designated as wilderness nor what other management classifications would be best for other lands. As such, Senator Domenici decided not to pursue wilderness and disposal legislation.

Also in February of 2006, the Sonoran Institute released a positive report on the economic advantages of wilderness designation in Doña Ana County ("The Potential Economic Impacts of Wilderness in Doña Ana County, New Mexico"). The report generally touted the overall economic benefits the county could expect to see with an increase in protective land designations. And, throughout the 2006 and into 2007, a number of citizen public forums are held in the county, demonstrated significant support for protecting public lands in general, and wilderness in particular.

After Senator Domenici withdrew from further consideration of legislation, then Senator Jeff Bingaman took the issue under consideration, and began extensive consultation with representatives of stakeholder—both those supportive, and those opposed, to wilderness protection in the county. The Senator, his staff, and the staff of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held numerous one-and-one meetings with all interested parties that continued for years as the proposed legislation was developed and after its introduction in various forms over the years. As a result of these discussions, in September 2009, Senator Bingaman, along with Senator Tom Udall, introduced compromise legislation that proposed 259,000 acres of wilderness within a 363,000 acre National Conservation Area.

In early 2010, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources (ENR) Committee held a field hearing in Las Cruces on the legislation to further gauge public support, and hear from those with concerns about the proposal. As a result of these hearings and other meetings between the senators and their staffs and local interests, the legislation was further modified to reduce the overall wilderness acreage, primarily by creating a "buffer zone" along the southern border to increase flexibility for border control operations by releasing existing wilderness study area acreage. Language was also added that specifically assured grazing permittees that their activities could continue unhindered. Even with 35,000 acres less of proposed wilderness, the bill was fully supported by the Doña Ana County Wilderness Coalition. The final version of the bill was approved by the Senate ENR Committee unanimously in September 2010. But, before the legislation could be considered by the full Senate, Congress adjourned.

In 2011, Senators Bingaman and Udall reintroduced their legislation for wilderness and NCA designations within Doña Ana County; however, congressional gridlock prevented the bill from being approved. This gridlock in congress lead the Doña Ana County Wilderness Coalition to reconsider their options for ensuring these special wild lands would be protected. In early 2011, a study initiated by the coalition, later assisted by amateur and professional historians, archaeologists, and naturalists, suggested important resources on public lands within the county qualified for preservation and protection from development under the Antiquities Act. Two years of research and on-the-ground studies confirmed there was a basis for petitioning the president for national monument designation based upon the presence of significant historical sites, dating from the last century back to prehistory, and objects of scientific interests, including unique and sensitive landscapes and habitats.

In early 2013, local advocates initiated a full-fledged campaign for an Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument. The campaign quickly received the formal endorsement of the New Mexico cities of Las Cruces, Mesilla, and Sunland Park, as well as the nearby city of El Paso in Texas. The major newspapers in Las Cruces, El Paso, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe endorsed the proposal. The Doña Ana County Commission formally declared its support. New Mexico's 19 Native American pueblos, and the pueblo of Ysleta del Sur east of El Paso, and the Fort Sill Apaches became advocates for the monument. As it gained national attention, veteran's groups, historical organizations, and conservationists added their support.

As support continued to grow for the monument proposal, in December 2013, Senator Udall and I introduced legislation to establish the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument. Shortly thereafter, in January 2014, we invited then-Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell to visit the county to tour the area and hear from local residents. The secretary's official listening session held in Las Cruces hosted an overflow crowd that was overwhelmingly supportive of the monument. Her subsequent report to the Council of Environmental Quality and the White House noted the strong public support for preserving the historic and scientific values of Doña Ana County public lands and culminated in the president's designation of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument on May 21, 2014.

Since the monument's establishment three years ago, the monument has become a point of pride for the local community. Last year, the Lonely Planet guide books named southern New Mexico one of its "Best in the U.S. 10 Ten" places, highlighting the new Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks National Monument as a new attraction. In September, a local chamber of commerce, the Las Cruces Convention and Visitor's Bureau, and the Friends of the Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks hosted a month-long celebration of the area's three national monuments, called Monuments to Main Street. The community organized events throughout the month to bring locals and visitors into the monuments, from a Full Moon Hike at White Sands National Monument to a helicopter tour of the giant targets used to train World War II bomber pilots, located within and protected by the OMDP National Monument.

Most recently, in the past month, the city council of Las Cruces, the mayors of Las Cruces, Mesilla, Anthony, and Sunland Park, and the county commission of Doña Ana County have reaffirmed their support of the monument in its existing form.

As you consider the future of the Organ Mountains – Desert Peaks National Monument, I hope you will take into consideration the decades of debate and engagement the local community has engaged in both before and after the monument's designation. I am confident you will find that the monument, with its current boundaries, is of great benefit to the region and is widely supported by the local community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Martin Heinrich', with a stylized, flowing script.

MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator