

**Statement of
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**Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining
S. 3241, Cerro de la Olla Wilderness / Río Grande del Norte National Monument
September 16, 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 3241. The bill would amend the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (P.L. 116-9) to establish approximately 13,000 acres in the Río Grande del Norte National Monument in New Mexico as the Cerro de la Olla Wilderness.

The Department of the Interior (Department), through Secretary's Orders 3347, 3356, 3366, and 3373, has pledged to expand access to America's public lands, to increase hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities nationwide, and to enhance conservation stewardship. In addition, the Department is focused on restoring full collaboration and coordination with local communities and making the Department a better neighbor.

While wilderness designation may be appropriate for some of the areas included in this legislation, the Department is concerned that the designation in the bill may present management challenges and be inconsistent with traditional uses that are of importance to local communities and the public. The Department cannot support S. 3241 as currently written.

Background

The Río Grande del Norte National Monument lies north of Taos on the border with Colorado, and straddles New Mexico's Taos and Rio Arriba Counties. The area is comprised of rugged, wide open plains at an average elevation of 7,000 feet, dotted by volcanic cones, and cut by steep canyons with rivers tucked away in their depths. The unique nature of these lands also provides a wealth of recreational opportunities, including whitewater rafting, hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, and camping.

In March 2019, President Trump signed the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act into law, which established the Cerro del Yuta and Río San Antonio Wilderness Areas within the Río Grande del Norte National Monument. These designations were among more than 100 individual bills that were ultimately incorporated into P.L. 116-9. Under Secretary Bernhardt's leadership, the Department has prioritized implementation of P.L. 116-9, including the establishment of a Departmental task force to facilitate and prioritize implementation through Secretary's Order 3374, *Implementation of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act*.

S. 3241

S. 3241 would designate approximately 13,000 acres of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as the Cerro de la Olla Wilderness within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. The Cerro de la Olla volcanic cone provides a visible reminder of the area's volatile past, while wildlife species – including deer, elk and antelope – bring both hunters and wildlife watchers to the area. As such, these lands have benefitted the public by providing opportunities for recreation, as well as grazing, and the collection of firewood and piñon nuts. The Department notes these uses could be diminished by a wilderness designation that would limit vehicular access for recreation, range improvement maintenance, and traditional firewood collection. Local residents have expressed these concerns and the BLM is concerned the wilderness designation may negatively impact residents' abilities to responsibly use the public lands they depend upon.

Additionally, the proposed designation overlaps a significant portion of a reserve common grazing allotment that the BLM has set aside for the temporary use of permittees displaced due to wildfire, vegetation treatment, drought, and other issues. Range improvements supporting the health of the reserve common allotment could be hindered by a wilderness designation. The Department also has concerns that a wilderness designation would have a detrimental effect on planned hazardous fuels reduction and forest management activities by limiting the use of motor vehicles and motorized tools. Furthermore, because this area poses significant wildfire risk, the limitations of a wilderness designation are inconsistent with the President's Executive Order 13855 and the Secretary's Order 3372 on promoting active land management to reduce wildfire risk.

The Department would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Subcommittee to ensure that this wilderness designation on public lands is the most appropriate mechanism to adequately protect the natural resources of this area. For instance, the BLM builds and maintains water catchments to provide water on a consistent dependable basis to benefit wildlife. The Department is concerned that S. 3241, as written, would limit the BLM's ability to support wildlife by constructing new water catchments. Alternative management approaches, outside of a wilderness designation, could conserve sensitive resources while still accommodating other uses and activities permitted within the monument.

If Congress opts to proceed with designation of these lands as wilderness, we would also like to work on minor and technical amendments, including boundary adjustments to enhance manageability and to ensure that the traditional public uses are preserved.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on S. 3241.