

Their View: It's more than ranchers who oppose 600,000 acre monument

By Frank DuBois / For the Sun-News Las Cruces Sun-News

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In his recent column (Greatest threat to ranchers is not proposed monument) Peter Goodman says opponents of the proposal are "anti-government," that we "lie or mislead people" and are guilty of "plain stubbornness."

In his op-ed (Ranchers seek to maintain stranglehold on public lands) Jim Bates says opponents of both wilderness and monument designations have "far-fetched excuses" and a "negative mentality," we are "grasping at straws" and make "preposterous and outlandish claims." In addition Bates writes ranchers suffer from "the fear of the unknown and change" and have "a stranglehold on public land-use policy."

My, what rascals we are.

It's hard to respond to such lucid arguments, but let me begin with the "stranglehold" assertion. After 39 years of experience on federal lands issues as a legislative assistant to Senator Pete Domenici, a deputy assistant Secretary of Interior and as the New Mexico Secretary of Agriculture, there is one thing about this proposal I'm sure of: If ranchers were the only opponents of these environmental designations they would already be wilderness. Senator Bingaman's bill would have passed and we would all be discussing the next plan the enviros have for our community.

No, it's not just ranching. It is ranching combined with border security and flood control that has resulted in the widespread opposition to these proposals.

Border security is an issue because the environmental designations would either prevent or restrict law enforcement activity. That's why the wilderness proposal was opposed by the sheriffs of Doña Ana, Luna and Hidalgo counties, the New Mexico Sheriffs Association and the National Association of Former Border Patrol Officers (NAFBPO). Most recently the Doña Ana County Sheriff and NAFBPO have expressed their opposition to the huge monument proposal. Concerning the monument, Victor Manjarez, the recently retired chief of the El Paso and Tucson sectors of the Border Patrol, has testified:

"These protected lands provide concealment and facilitate the movement of criminal organizations that have endangered the residents of the United States and will continue to do so as long as the Border Patrol is restricted from executing its duties to the full extent of the law. Not only do these protected areas make the job of border security extremely difficult they are a magnet to the criminal element which often does significant damage to these pristine areas."

As Manjarez points out, border security is not just about human and drug trafficking, it's also about resource damage. The Bureau of Land Management recently called in 12 of their law enforcement officers from across the West and had them perform several sweeps of the Sonoran Desert National Monument in southern Arizona. According to news reports, here's what they found: 160 abandoned vehicles, 110 bicycles, 24 tons of trash, 27,000 pounds of marijuana, 1,200 illegal aliens, miles of illegal roads and "acres of plastic water bottles, coats, backpacks and other items cast off after trekking for days from the U.S.-Mexican border to rendezvous points 75 miles to the north." That's right, this monument is 70 miles north of the border!

On the water issue, Gary Esslinger with the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) says there are over 100 ageing dams on both sides of the Rio Grande which are in need of repair and restrictions on roads and structures to restore or replace these dams "leaves the valley vulnerable to flooding." In addition to flooding and watershed restoration, there is also the issue of providing new water for the betterment and growth of our community. Thanks to a 2008 agreement between New Mexico and Texas, Esslinger says the EBID has "the right to capture stormwater." Again, restrictions on roads and structures would prevent this unique opportunity from happening. Those are some of the reasons the monument proposal is opposed by the EBID, Doña Ana Soil & Water Conservation District, New Mexico Coalition of Conservation Districts, Council of Border Conservation Districts and the village of Hatch.

Let me close with the grazing issue. Goodman says the monument "might help preserve the ranching heritage" and

Bates writes that even though there is a "small number of ranchers" within the footprint of the monument, the proposal would "specifically include protections for livestock grazing." I guess 38 ranchers in one county is a small number to Bates.

The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance's monument proposal contains the same livestock grazing language used in the proclamation to designate the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah. Three years after that monument was designated the BLM totally closed four ranches to grazing and partially closed grazing on another four ranches to "reduce or eliminate livestock recreation conflicts." More recently, on July 6th of this year an environmental group has filed suit seeking a similar outcome on 21 additional ranches within the monument. I seriously doubt any of these folks feel their ranching heritage has been preserved or protected.

Another environmental group has acquired four of the grazing allotments in the Utah monument. They tried to relinquish those grazing permits back to the BLM but found they must actually have livestock and ranch the areas. If something similar were to happen here, the Cox Family and their 120 years of ranching heritage in the Organ Mountains would be replaced by Steinborn Land & Livestock, with "Cowboy" Ken Miyagishima as ranch foreman and "Gabby" Small as the camp cookie.

Surely we have a brighter future than a Monkey Wrench Ranch.

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