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Doña Ana County, New Mexico**

**Testimony on HR 4334
"Organ Mountains National Monument Establishment Act"**

6-25-12

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to comment on HR 4334.

Doña Ana County, New Mexico, contains a number of areas of exceptional beauty and significance associated with the Chihuahuan Desert, Southwestern pre-history, life on the American frontier, and emergence of the United States as an international power.

I think it is fair to say that most of our residents value this heritage and want to see it protected on a permanent basis.

The breadth of this support is indicated, in part, by the legislation introduced by Congressman Pearce. Unfortunately, HR 4334 does not adequately meet the needs of Doña Ana County. Compared with other proposals that have had extensive public input, this bill fails to protect almost 90% of the lands that our community believes should be protected, and seeks to remove the interim wilderness protection for 19,667 acres of land within the Organ Mountains.

For more than thirty years, residents of Doña Ana County have worked to protect public lands that are important to our heritage. Over the past six years strong support has emerged for a number of conservation proposals. Senators Bingaman and Udall have been particularly instrumental in this process—especially with respect to natural resources. Countless hours of community meetings, public hearings, and conversations with a diverse range of stakeholders have closely examined which lands should be protected, and how best to address issues of concern such as border security, vehicular access, storm water management, and ranching.

These issues were substantially resolved through the diligence of our senators and in 2009 they introduced legislation that would have designated significant aspects of our landscape as federal wilderness and national conservation areas. Unfortunately that bill, along with many other pieces of bi-partisan conservation legislation, was not brought up for a final vote. In 2011, Senators Bingaman and Udall reintroduced their legislation and it is in the Senate today waiting for action as S. 1024.

Twice, by unanimous vote, the Board of Commissioners of Doña Ana County passed resolutions in support of these bills.

Parallel to this legislative process, a number local historians, archeologists, business owners, elected officials, and sportsmen developed a new proposal that offers an opportunity to protect not only important natural areas, but also places that are noteworthy for their pre-historic and historic associations. This community-based proposal would use Presidential authorities granted in the 1906 Antiquities Act to establish an "Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument" and would entrust oversight of this new monument to the Bureau of Land Management.

On May 22, 2012, the Board of Commissioners of Doña Ana County unanimously approved a resolution in support of this proposal, which is significantly larger and more complex than the area covered by HR 4334. My comments today are based on that resolution.

A number of individuals who support a larger national monument are with me today. They include: Oscar Vasquez Butler, former Chair of the Doña Ana County Commission; Fernando Clemente, a local businessman; Roberta Salazar-Henry, retired Deputy Director of the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, Ben Gabriel, an outdoor guide; and John Cornell of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation.

We agree with Congressman Pearce that the Bureau of Land Management would be the best federal agency to oversee a new national monument in Doña Ana County. As a multi-use agency, BLM has a long tradition of community involvement and is well equipped to develop management approaches that would conserve resources, maintain traditional ranching interests, and support public uses including outdoor recreation, hunting, and tourism.

Let me underscore that point. Any national monument in Doña Ana County should be managed in a way that facilitates research, conserves resources, respects existing ranching interests, and provides for a wide range of uses such as outdoor recreation, hunting, and tourism.

Throughout the history of conservation efforts in southern New Mexico, protection of the Organ Mountains has always been a primary concern. The Organs provide a backdrop for the entire Mesilla Valley and contain important natural resources that are currently protected through designation as National Wilderness Study Areas.

While HR 4334 offers some protection for the Organs, the area covered in this bill is 30% smaller than the area outlined in the proposed Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument and would reduce protection over the most pristine wild areas.

Unfortunately, HR 4334 also fails to address other special places in our county that deserve preservation. They include: the Potrillo Volcanic Field and West Potrillo Mountains, Aden Lava Flow, Kilborne Hole National Historic Landmark, Broad Canyon, and the Doña Ana, Robledo, and Sierra de las Uvas Mountains.

These areas are important geologically and as exceptional examples of Chihuahuan Desert landscape. They also contain thousands of petroglyphs and other archeological sites, as well as historical sites as diverse as the route used by the Butterfield Stage, a WW-II bombing range, and a training venue for the Apollo astronauts.

All of these areas offer exceptional opportunities for students to learn about our desert environment, families to connect with their cultural traditions, and just about anyone to have a great outdoors experience. All of these places would be protected under the proposed Organ-Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument. None are included in HR 4334.

The window of time available for protection of this heritage is small and closing fast. Doña Ana County is the second fastest growing county in New Mexico and currently is home to more than 200,000 people. Between 2000 and 2010 our population increased by almost 20% and most sources project an additional increase to more than 300,000 residents within the next 25 years.

Our regional plan, “One Valley, One Vision 2040”, calls for strong economic growth supported by planning and growth management strategies. With respect to our heritage, the plan states, “As we map out our future we recognize the value of our mountains, desert environment, rivers, agriculture, and private-property rights and (the need to) live within the limitations of this unique land and (its) natural resources.”

In order to provide for all the roads, schools, utilities, and public services--including fire and police protection--that are going to be required, elected officials need to know where development might best be encouraged. A new comprehensive national monument could help this process by clearly identifying some of the federal lands that should be left undeveloped on a permanent basis. HR 4334 misses the opportunity to provide this guidance simply because it is limited to the Organ Mountains.

The area that would be protected by HR 4334 is simply too small when considered in the context of our county as a whole. By contrast, the monument proposal that has been endorsed by our Board of Commissioners would encompass an area of approximately 600,000 acres or 935 square miles. Roughly 83% of this area is currently under BLM management. Of the remainder, most are state-owned lands that could be exchanged for other federally owned property.

Let me put the size of the proposed larger monument in perspective. Doña Ana County encompasses 3,804 square miles. That’s almost the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined. About 12% of Doña Ana County is privately owned, another 12% is state land, and the rest is federal. Setting aside 587,220 acres of public land for heritage conservation values would affect less than one-third of all federal lands in Doña Ana County and leave about 600,000 acres of current BLM lands open for other uses.

Doña Ana County does not have a land shortage and establishment of a larger, more comprehensive monument would in no way adversely affect economic development. On

the contrary, a larger monument would protect the visual qualities that are important to our real estate market, and expand business opportunities for tourism, hunting, and outdoor recreation. Personally, I would hope that a larger monument might also offer existing ranching families new opportunities for economic diversification, while respecting their core business activity.

In conclusion, while HR 4334 is a step in the right direction, it falls far short of local interests and expectations in terms of geographic coverage and protection of wilderness areas such as those afforded in S 1024.

With that Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I thank you for your time and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.