

New Mexico Wilderness Alliance

May 2016 Advisory Newsletter

“State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn came out with rhetorical guns blazing this week when it was announced that state Trust Land was among two areas within the Rio Grande National Monument near Taos that were included in the U.S. Senate’s energy bill for wilderness status, calling the move a ‘land grab’ that is ‘tantamount to a slap in the face of New Mexico’s schoolchildren.’ ...

“While Dunn’s reaction may be a little over the top, he is correct to note that 1,280 acres proposed for wilderness are state Trust Lands ... But while it would be a plus to protect the wild lands within the monument, the federal government should not expect to take lands with income-producing potential from the state without compensation.”

—Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board, May 1, 2016

State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn got it wrong. And so did the Albuquerque Journal.

New Mexico’s state land commissioner, Aubrey Dunn, is in charge of 9 million acres of state Trust Land and is required to manage them to optimize revenues for the beneficiaries of the trust, which include schools, universities, hospitals and other public institutions.

“State trust land is not ‘public land’ and is not accessible by the general public unless permitted by my office. ... Given the State Land Office’s wholly different mission from federal land management agencies ... lessees (should) manage their leased lands in a manner that is in the best interest of the trust.” Commissioner Dunn, June 12, 2015, letter to the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

An important point, to be sure. And, as he said, a mission quite different than the purpose and importance of our national public lands. In fact, what could be construed as a “land grab,” is Commissioner Dunn’s support of the transfer of millions of acres of our public lands to the state, to be leased out for energy and mineral development by private corporations.

The land proposed to be permanently protected as Wilderness (representing 21,420 acres or approximately 9 percent of the national monument) consists of the most natural and remote gems.

It is true that there are 1,280 acres of state land within the proposed Wilderness areas in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. [Unfortunately, that is about the only thing that Commissioner Dunn and the Albuquerque Journal got right.](#) **The facts:**

1. If the Cerros Bill becomes law, the state of New Mexico will still own, manage and have access to these Trust Lands.

2. The little revenue these state Trust Lands are currently producing comes from grazing fees, and grazing would be allowed to continue.
3. Though they don’t yet enjoy permanent protection through legislation, the federal lands are already being managed as Wilderness by the Bureau of Land Management.
4. In no way could this be considered a “land grab” since the lands to be protected by this federal legislation are already federal public lands.
5. The federal government isn’t “taking” state lands so there is no need for “compensation.”
6. These are rugged roadless areas, with important wildlife, archeological, scenic and recreation values. At 10,093 feet, Ute Mountain/Cerro del Yuta is the tallest peak (cerro) in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. The San Antonio Wilderness Study Area is critical winter habitat for pronghorn antelope and one of New Mexico’s largest herds of elk, which bring sportsmen and hunting dollars to the local economy.
7. People visit northern New Mexico because of its scenic vistas and wilderness landscapes. Conservation of our most special places and public wildlands translates to an increase in visitors and tourist dollars, creates jobs and small businesses and is a sustainable model for economic growth and development.

The real story is that these state lands could be traded for federal public lands outside of the monument. However, the state land commissioner has been slow to work with the Bureau of Land Management to identify lands with higher revenue potential that could be exchanged. Swapping out remote state lands within the national monument and proposed wilderness areas for those with greater potential for higher yields to benefit the state trust should actually be seen as **a great opportunity** for the State Land Office and trust beneficiaries.

But the commissioner would rather try to score cheap political points than roll up his sleeves and fulfill his office’s responsibility.

New Mexico’s Land Commissioner is proposing that we ruin these rare wild places forever by **opening mining operations there**. Can you imagine?!

While oil, gas and mining operations may be

appropriate in some places, they are **not appropriate** everywhere and certainly not in the Cerro del Yuta or Rio San Antonio areas of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Setting aside some very special areas for wildlife, water quality, recreation, traditional uses and cultural heritage and for the benefit of future generations is the right and prudent thing to do.

A recent BIPARTISAN public opinion poll conducted by Public Opinion Strategies, a Republican polling firm used by Gov. Susana Martinez, and Fairbank and Associates, a Democratic polling firm, found that more than 2 out of 3 New Mexicans oppose the state control of public lands and don’t think it would be fair or fiscally responsible to force New Mexico taxpayers to foot the bill for managing America’s public lands (68 percent opposed, 26 percent in favor).

Voters in the Land of Enchantment truly do seem spellbound by the state. They cite the environment and the healthy, outdoor lifestyle as the most significant factors why they choose to live in New Mexico. In fact, 85 percent of surveyed voters say protecting and conserving natural areas for future generations is very important.

The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance will continue to fight for permanent legislative protections for these wilderness treasures. We will continue to shine the light on misinformation and deceit. We will continue to hold elected officials like Commissioner Dunn accountable. We vow to continue to speak up for our increasingly rare and threatened wild places.

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Thank you for supporting all of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance’s work, including keeping public lands in public hands and legislative campaigns for new Wilderness.

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*This level supports our work to monitor agency and elected officials’ decisions affecting our wild public lands!

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Thank you for helping the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance shine a light on Wilderness—it belongs!