



Losing the Caja: why protections matter

FROM YOUR
EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR

For years, we have advocated for protecting the Caja del Rio, the magnificent 107,000-acre plateau just outside of Santa Fe. That urgent need for protection was never more evident than from the recent decision of the US Forest Service to allow the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to construct a 14-mile utility corridor across these lands. Near the Rio Grande and Bandelier National Monument, the Caja is one of the most ecologically rich and culturally significant landscapes in the American Southwest. These lands are sacred to many Pueblos, historic, an important wildlife corridor, traditionally used by local Hispano communities, and a recreational resource for many. The utility corridor will be 100-feet wide, with 17 new transmission towers, and include roads to build and service the project. In our view, this is an outrage and one that could have been avoided had the Caja del Rio been permanently protected through a national monument designation as one example. The NNSA suggests there will be "no significant impact" from this project. They are wrong. We filed a formal objection and met with the US Forest Service as the lead objector. The fight continues for the Caja.



Communities and partners stand against the Forest Service draft decision

The NNSA proposal to transverse the Caja with high-power transmission lines faced strong opposition when it was being considered. Opposition to the project came from sovereign Tribes, the All Pueblo Council of Governors, local Hispano communities, and thousands of New Mexicans. Following the USFS draft decision, the Santa Fe County

Commissioners voted to call on federal officials to pause plans to begin construction to allow more time for studies on potential negative impacts. New Mexico Wild, on behalf of the Caja Coalition and other conservation organizations,

authored and filed a formal objection to the decision, calling out the defiance of federal laws that require more substantive cultural and environmental assessments. The decision appears to conflict with the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Forest Management Act, including the 2012 Planning Rule and Roadless Rule. We called for a full Environmental Impact Statement, the completion of an Ethnographic study, and serious evaluation of alternatives, and ultimately, the denial of this project.

We will continue working with communities and partners to stop a decision that will affect these important wildlands forever. We'll keep fighting for permanent protections until we are successful.

Mark Allison
Executive Director
New Mexico Wild



See what we all stand to lose. More about the Caja on the other side.



The Caja del Rio Story

The Caja national monument campaign has enjoyed overwhelming community support for the past several years but was unable to gain traction with the Department of Interior until there was consensus among the Pueblos. After a draft decision was released by the Santa Fe National Forest authorizing a major new transmission corridor, Tesuque Pueblo called on the congressional delegation to help permanently protect the Caja del Rio as a national monument. A Resolution from the All Pueblo Council of Governors in support passed unanimously quickly thereafter, which enabled the coalition to instigate a cascade of subsequent events, that included a letter from the Santa Fe County Commission, the coalition's own letter (signed by 25 Indigenous, Hispano, government, business, grazing permittee, faith, and conservation leaders), and a letter to the administration from New Mexico's entire

congressional delegation asking for the creation of a national monument.

New Mexico Wild was central to these developments. All of the community-building work spanning years, as well as critical work facilitating highly delicate conversations within and between stakeholder groups, resulted in a remarkable series of events, accomplishments, and momentum. Disappointingly, despite our best efforts, and despite a supportive congressional delegation and a sympathetic administration, we were informed that there simply was not enough time to get this across the finish line before the change of Administrations.

But we are not done. We plan to continue to pursue permanent protection in this new congress by pushing to have legislation introduced in the House and Senate, and - in the spirit of the best defense is a good offense - pursuing a national monument designation in the Trump administration.

From wildlife habitat, to ancient petroglyphs, to an amazing array of wildflowers, the vistas of the Caja del Rio provide a respite from the pace and development of today's world.



Photographs by Jim O'Donnell



Help us continue the fight to protect our public lands from irreversible decisions. Use the enclosed donation form and return envelope or donate online.

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