

Testimony

Of

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Before the

U.S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests & Public Lands Oversight Hearing

on

"Locally Grown: Creating Rural Jobs with America's Public Lands"

Thursday, July 15, 2010, at 10:00 a.m.

Room 1324 Longworth House Office Building

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Bebo Lee and I live in southeastern New Mexico. I am here before you today representing myself, the New Mexico Public Lands Council and the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on some concerns that have arisen by the people that live on Otero Mesa and the Otero County Commission itself about the possible National Monument on Otero Mesa, the lack of involvement of the local government and residents in the whole process as well as the potential for eliminating jobs rather than creating them.

Grazing of livestock has occurred on Otero Mesa for over 100 years. The longevity of these businesses shows the economical viability of their management practices. There are numerous families that have been grazing continuously on Otero Mesa at least 30 years prior to New Mexico becoming a state (1912). They are proponents of multiuse of the BLM lands, not limited use.

When word first came out about the possibility of a National Monument designation the agricultural community again had concerns (immediately) about their livelihood and investments. We all wonder what happened to having an open and transparent government. A number of these individuals, having been through the creation of the national forest, condemnation of the lands for Holloman Air Force Base, the eviction of ranchers and condemnation of lands on White Sands Missile Range, the establishment and eviction of ranchers of McGregor Range, the elimination of ranchers and establishment of San Andres National Wildlife Refuge, the elimination of all private holdings and the establishment of White Sands National Monument (which they were never compensated for), and the continued expansion of Ft. Bliss Military Range, know that (feel) they will be (are) on the receiving end again.

As was experienced in those past actions, there has been no official notice of a possible monument designation (has been) given or explanation why a designation is possibly needed. It has been rumored it is to stop further oil and gas drilling, which probably makes sense because the environmental groups have courted the ranch community to oppose oil and gas development since a producing well had been completed on Otero Mesa. But they have not gained any inroads because of the natural mistrust. Several groups have proposed to make Otero Mesa a national conservation area or wilderness and have published considerable literature about Otero Mesa and the need to protect it. Most of this does not tell the whole story.

Otero Mesa has been portrayed as a huge block of federal land consisting of 1.2 million acres. As you can see by the map provided (attachment A) Otero Mesa is intermingled with federal land, New Mexico State Trust land and of private property. It would be difficult to get 1.2 million acres even including all the state trust lands and

private property. You may also notice the number of allottees who live on Otero Mesa and the surrounding areas which are not geographically considered Otero Mesa.

Was the New Mexico State Land Office or private land owners notified about the possible designations? Shouldn't they be as, it will directly affect them if the state trust lands were traded out because of a monument designation? In the past, the NM State Land Office traded out their lands that were located in what is now McGregor Range and Holloman Air Force Base. If the land is not swapped out it would be land locked and unable to generate income from wind or solar activities, leasing of hunting rights and the proposed wind and water project (Attachment B) could be affected. In turn the improvements agriculture has made on state lands by the lessee's would be under increased scrutiny from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), subject to new rules and regulations and possible abandonment, because they may not fit into the monument's mission. For that reason the local residents should know up front about this and be involved in the whole process. The thought is if a monument is designated that eventually, through special rules, permits, or not meetings the goals of the missions, livestock would be removed permanently as is the case in some of the Monument Designations.

If a monument is created and the rules would not allow for an economical way to maintain, repair or new improvements then the cattle would be sold, which would incur a loss of jobs and in the tax base for Otero County.

In a county with a limited tax base already because of Holloman Air Force Base, McGregor Impact Range, White Sands Missile Range and Mescalero Indian reservation what would the federal government do to compensate Otero Counties tax base with, tourist dollars? A study from Range Improvement Task Force at NM State University, suggests that tourism will not generate that much income. (Attachment C)

The study shows agriculture returns \$2.00 for every \$1.00 that is spent in the local community.

These are some of the items that were discussed before the Otero County Commission passed Ordinance #10-05 (Attachment D) so that possibly the administration

and federal agencies would co-ordinate with the county before any process starts and throughout the entire process of a monument designation.

One of the questions that have arisen is what is the Administration trying to protect Otero Mesa from or for. When the environmental groups first came to Otero Mesa and started promoting to protect the area they said it was like the pristine savannas of Africa. At the time Otero Mesa was in the -fourth year of an eight year drought. If they truly believed this, would it not mean that the ranchers and the BLM have been good stewards of the land for over 100 years?

As I prepared to come before you today I inquired about the total number of power line miles and meters that would fall into and around the designated area. To my surprise I was told that the Department of Homeland Security would not release the number of miles and number of meters that would need to be serviced if the Monument was designated. How can you plan for routine maintenance, repair and expansion of the lines if you do not have a current data at the starting pointing? On this point, Dell Telephone Company has several hundred miles of fiber optic lines that will need to be serviced. People in rural communities rely on good communication on a daily basis for several different reasons one of which is emergency services. If a line is not working it literally could mean the difference in life and death.

There are gas lines running through the area as well as the potential for wind generation. What will a monument designation do to these projects?

There is a lot of misinformation regarding Otero Mesa. I would encourage Congress, the Administration and agencies to personally look at the areas and coordinate with the local government and residents before making a judgment.

Why is this designation being brought forward? To protect grass land, stop oil & gas development, protect wildlife and limit grazing or for the wild lands project? (attachment E).

Thank you again, for the opportunity to address the committee. I will stand for questions.

Bebo Lee

Attachments:

- A. Otero County Map
- B. Wind & Water Prospectus
- C. Range Improvement Task Force Report
- D. Otero County Ordinance
- E. Wildlife Corridors Map