

Ambassador 4 Range

July 16, 2007

Stevan Pearce
Member of Congress
New Mexico – District 2
400 Telshor Ste E
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Jeff Bingaman
U.S. Senator, State of NM
201 3rd Street, NW
Ste 710
Albuquerque, NM 87102

Pete Domenici
U.S. Senator, State of NM
Loretto Town Centre
505 S. Main, Ste 148
Las Cruces, NM 88001

Dona Ana County Wilderness Proposal

Dear Representative Pearce, Senator Bingaman, and Senator Domenici:

You may recognize my name as having retired from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and most recently having served as the Rangeland Management Specialist in the New Mexico State Office. It is from my years of service in the BLM, my experience and interest in all issues of rangeland management that I am contacting you. I am aware that you are considering legislation concerning establishment of additional Wilderness areas on public lands in the Las Cruces vicinity. The establishment of Wilderness areas is a very serious issue and I encourage you to not propose legislation without a thorough consideration of the social, cultural and economic impacts being documented and available to you.

Beginning in the 1990s, scientists began to adjust their thinking on how rangelands should be managed. Previously, the general principle was that rangelands were in balance and they would return to the historic vegetation if man's use was stopped. It is now recognized by rangeland ecological science that rangelands often go through thresholds and they will not return to the historic vegetation conditions without significant physical management actions.

The semi-desert lands in the Las Cruces area illustrate the new scientific thought. Much of the land will not naturally return to the historic grassland vegetation conditions once brush species occupy the site. Once brush species occupy a site that historically produced grasslands, it will require such actions as chemical or mechanical brush control to return the site to that native grassland. It is also possible that it will require mesquite dune destruction, soil amendments, irrigation and reseeded to return to historic vegetation. Because of economic and/or physical reasons, it may not be possible to return to historic vegetation conditions in some areas, but the potential might be good in others.

Research at the Jornada Experimental Range, New Mexico State University and other locations is improving our understanding of how desert grasslands respond to various management actions. We can expect that in addition to the existing techniques available today, new and improved science will increase agency abilities to reseed and return native grasslands in the future.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Agricultural Research Service - Jornada Experimental Range and BLM had a cooperative program to document the current science of the rangelands in southern New Mexico. Each ecological site has an individual description. The descriptions are available at the New Mexico NRCS web site.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in coordination with the agencies has been working on a program to review available information and document the present vegetation conditions of the public lands in relation to the vegetation "states" in the ecological site descriptions. TNC analysis will identify the lands that are in the historic vegetation state. It will also identify the lands that will return to the historic vegetation state by stopping use or properly managing uses of the land. Additionally, lands will be identified that will require active management including brush control, reseeding, soil amendments, and/or dune destruction to return to the historic vegetation. I am not aware of the current status of the TNC work in southern New Mexico. However, I recommend that action not be taken regarding establishment of additional Wilderness in southern New Mexico until the report is completed and reviewed by you.

Prudent proposals for Wilderness areas in New Mexico must include a thorough analysis of the present and future vegetative state conditions similar to that of the TNC. Lands that will require active management actions to return to historic vegetation conditions should not be considered for Wilderness or Wilderness Study Areas. They should be eliminated from further consideration until the historic vegetation has returned.

Keeping areas that do not have the historic vegetation out of designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study Area status is necessary because it is likely that applying the required herbicides and mechanical practices will not be allowed in areas designated as Wilderness or Wilderness Study Areas. Thus, the areas that are not in the historic vegetation condition would be doomed to remain without historic vegetation if put under Wilderness or Wilderness Study Area designation.

Please consider these developments, this thought process, and the implications of prematurely establishing Wilderness areas before you act.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob".

P. Robert Alexander
Certified Professional in Rangeland Management
PO Box 23507
Santa Fe, NM 87502