

**Statement of
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Taos County Commissioner, District 3
Chair, Taos County Board of County Commissioners
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
H.R. 2522, Cerro de la Olla Wilderness Establishment Act
June 21, 2021**

Good morning. I would like to thank Chair Neguse, the subcommittee members, and Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernandez for the invitation to join you today. And I'm grateful to Representative Leger Fernandez, Senator Martin Heinrich and Senator Ben Ray Luján for their leadership on Cerro de la Olla Wilderness Establishment Act.

My name is Darlene Vigil, and it is my pleasure as chair of the Taos County Board of Commissioners, as Taos County Commissioner representing District 3, and as a lifelong resident of Taos, New Mexico, to give my support to this act.

The reintroduction of this legislation to establish wilderness designation for the 13,103-acre Cerro de la Olla – also known locally as Pot Mountain – within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument northwest of Taos, is well deserved.

The name of this noble mountain is derived from its shape. “Olla” means pot or vessel. This domed caldera, has been important to wildlife, hunters, herb collectors, and wood gatherers for hundreds of years. The alpine grasslands within the caldera at 9,500 feet above sea level, as well as the high desert grassland below the caldera, provide critical habitat for a large migratory herd of elk, along with other species. In the winter, the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument is home to one of the largest elk herds – you might see 10,000 of them on a given day – and the Cerro de la Olla area you are considering today is directly in the middle of that herd's east-west migration corridor.

For about 30 years this area has been closed to motorized traffic, by order of the Bureau of Land Management. However, it has remained accessible from horseback and on foot. The intention of keeping the mountain without roads is to protect migratory passage for elk, bear, mountain lion and other wildlife, as well as to protect the area's cultural resources.

Humans have visited Cerro de la Olla for thousands of years. There are several significant archeological sites on the flanks of those mountains that go all the way back to Paleolithic people, who waited for deer and elk there. It was also a very significant place for early Spanish settlers in the 16th and 17th Centuries, who relied on these lands for hunting. Today, local residents continue that tradition, taking advantage of longstanding primitive campsites on the side of the mountain.

Wilderness designation for Cerro de la Olla would protect these cultural sites and traditional land uses. It will protect this special spot for New Mexicans and others who visit this rugged mountain to appreciate the solitude it offers, and to enjoy its mesmerizing 360-degree views. From the top of the mountain, you can see peaks 175 miles away.

It's important to note that this bill has the vocal support of local ranchers in Taos County, along with hunters, outdoor recreationists, and business owners. Our local elected officials have also publicly supported the wilderness designation. And the original inhabitants of the Taos Valley, the Red Willow People of Taos Pueblo, have always recognized the sacredness of Cerro de la Olla.

In Northern New Mexico, our traditions count for a lot. And those traditions are deeply rooted in the land. For centuries, our people have depended on the land for nourishment and for our livelihood. This legislation will forever protect Cerro de la Olla's wildlife habitat. And it will protect our community's access to hunting, to gathering the firewood that keeps our families warm, and to collecting the piñon that feeds us. If you visit Northern New Mexico at the right time, you can still today see people on their hands and knees in the foothills harvesting piñon and spending time together outdoors.

This bill recognizes the importance of saving this special place for tomorrow's visitors, human and wildlife alike, so that they may have the same opportunities we are fortunate enough to enjoy today. We want to see this remarkable mountain and its wild beauty protected as wilderness for the benefit of present and future generations. We want to see our traditions preserved.

Thank you for your consideration.