

Time to protect integrity of area around Chaco

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Last week, the Society for American Archaeology, New Mexico Archaeological Council, Chaco Alliance, WildEarth Guardians and San Juan Citizens Alliance petitioned the Bureau of Land Management to designate a Greater Chaco Landscape Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The ACEC would include about 1.1 million acres surrounding the national historic park.

The current park is just the core of an area rich in archaeological treasures. The ACEC would include several Chacoan Great House Communities, as well as the Great North Road, which linked Chaco to the current Aztec Ruins National Monument.

The recognition of the unique values of the area have been recognized by the BLM and the National Park Service, which supported the designation of the area as a World Heritage Site because of the many important features not included within the park itself.

The primary threat to these ancient treasures is from gas and oil development. In 2003, when the BLM completed the management plan for the area, it found the likelihood of much development in the area to be very small. Yet, now, the most active area of new oil drilling in the San Juan Basin is just to the north. There have been three attempts by industry to get the BLM to lease parcels right on the edge of the park. While the BLM has so far indicated it would defer those leases, a more permanent solution is critically needed.

The BLM Farmington Field Office is 94 percent leased for gas and oil, and has about 18,000 active gas and oil wells, with more than 2,400 existing leases. The protection of the Greater Chaco Landscape from such development would not prevent or even slow current or future development.

The effects of gas and oil development in the Greater Chaco area would include: a loss of the vast, empty feel of the landscape; loss of the notable and important silence that impresses all who visit; a real threat of rock fall or structure collapse from seismic events (small earthquakes) because of drilling, fracking or waste-water injection; and in many ways unique to this area, the loss of night darkness.

Just last month, on Aug. 19, Chaco became an International Dark Sky Park, in recognition of it being one of the best places in America to see the night sky. The National Park Service has said that nearby wells already are having an impact and is concerned with more and closer development. The Chacoan people are known to have been active astronomers.

The effort by the five organizations that submitted the petition is only a part of a larger effort to protect the Greater Chaco Landscape from energy development. Recently, the Hopi Tribe sent a letter asking for congressional assistance, as the tribe has lost faith in the BLM's willingness to protect the area.

The San Juan Basin is more than an energy sacrifice area. The BLM still fails to understand that, and 94 percent is not enough for the energy companies. It is time to make the area an ACEC and protect this unique and important region.