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*Opinion/Perspective*

## **Vast land, vast protection**

**The National Landscape Conservation System includes lots of attractions in New Mexico and the West, including Tent Rocks and the Ojito Wilderness, but its continuation and success is in danger**

**Scott MacCurdy**

Not many people are aware of America's newest system of conservation lands.

The conservation system is run by the Bureau of Land Management and encompasses vast, wild landscapes featuring scenic wonders, archaeological resources and paleontological treasures.

Protecting this heritage for future generations will require public and political support. That's why it is important that a group of representatives in Congress has formed a bipartisan National Landscape Conservation System Caucus, whose members include New Mexico Reps. Heather Wilson, a Republican, and Tom Udall, a Democrat.

Since the BLM's inception, the 262 million acres under its management have been underprotected and overused for commercial gain. The conservation system, located primarily in New Mexico and other western states, encompasses 26 million acres - about the size of Virginia, in total - including national monuments and conservation areas, wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers and national historic and scenic trails.

New Mexico gems in the conservation system include Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument, between Santa Fe and Albuquerque; and El Malpais National Conservation Area, south of I-40 in Cibola County.

As suburbs and cities continue to sprawl, there's an urgent need to preserve the last remaining wild lands under federal control. This system of undeveloped lands - which also includes the new Ojito Wilderness, the Wild Rivers Recreation Area north of Taos, and the Rio Chama west of Taos - allows for New Mexican and American tourists alike to experience the raw and natural vistas that gave our state the title "The Land of Enchantment."

Opportunities for recreation abound throughout the conservation system, including hiking, hunting, camping, fishing, horseback riding and world-class birding. These activities, combined with scenic vistas, also provide a considerable economic benefit to surrounding local communities.

To make sure the conservation system can continue providing such benefits, more resources are needed for law enforcement to protect thousands of known cultural and historic resources, as

well as scenic treasures. The system was recently listed as one of America's 11 most endangered places by the National Historic Preservation Trust.

To make it as grand as its portfolio of lands, the BLM urgently needs increased funding to implement conservation plans that will stand the test of time.

Forming the congressional caucus was a crucial first step to safeguarding these crown jewels. It demonstrates the congressional vision and leadership needed to manage this system of lands for our children's future.

Traditionally, conservation lands have been managed by the National Park Service. The conservation system is a change in that tradition, offering the BLM a chance to prove that it can manage spectacular landscapes in a world-class system. We're counting on the caucus to make sure BLM has the political support it needs to do the job right.

BLM has a unique opportunity to showcase how it can transform from being what critics see as the Bureau of "Livestock and Mining" to the Bureau of "Landscapes and Monuments."

I hope one day to take my grandchildren out to my favorite spot, Wild Rivers Recreation Area, where I camp, hike, fish and photograph New Mexico's beautiful high desert landscapes. This can only happen if the conservation system is protected, and a responsible and sustainable conservation plan is implemented.

*MacCurdy is the new president of Republicans for Environmental Protection, New Mexico Chapter. REP's national office is in Albuquerque.*