

NEW MEXICO

Managing [13.5 million acres](#) across the state of New Mexico, the Bureau of Land Management is the state's largest land manager. [These lands include four national monuments, two national conservation areas \(NCA\), three national scenic and historic trails, two wild and scenic rivers, 16 wilderness areas and 48 wilderness study areas \(WSA\).](#) There are also nearly 344,459 acres of BLM-identified Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC), and local New Mexico organizations such as [New Mexico Wild](#) have identified another 2.9 million acres of LWCs that should be considered for protection as WSAs.



Caja del Rio, New Mexico
Photo: New Mexico Wild, Garrett VeneKlase

These public lands are critical to the state's recreation and outdoor economy. According to the Bureau of Economic Affairs, the [outdoor recreation economy in New Mexico](#) generates \$1.1 billion in wages and salaries, almost 26,000 jobs, and almost 2% of New Mexico's GDP. These lands are vital to New Mexico's big game and wildlife populations including pronghorn antelope, black-tailed prairie dogs, and thousands of bird species.

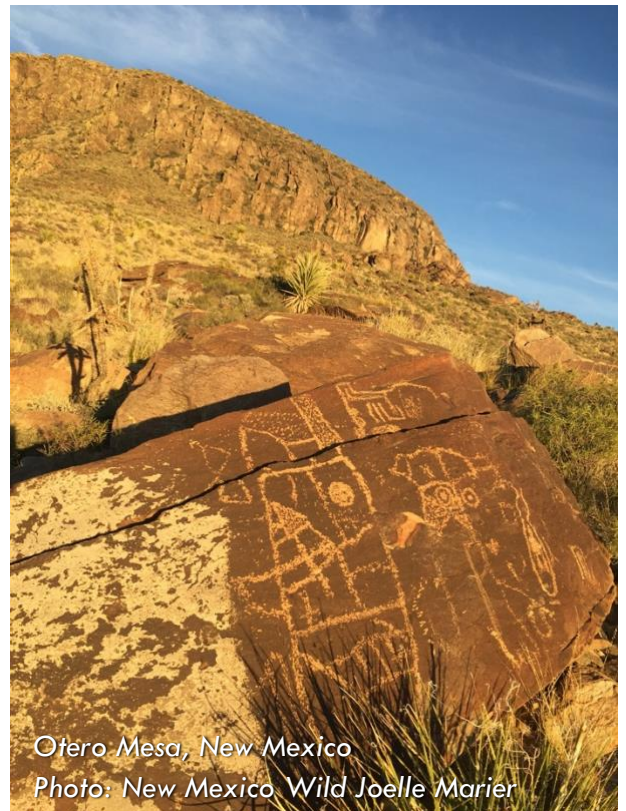
Despite the important role BLM public lands play for communities across the state, only 11% are durably protected. Given the growing pressures and societal costs we've already seen from climate change, the BLM needs to do more to ensure these special places are protected and bring these lands into balance with our needs.

Fortunately, the BLM's new [Public Land Rule](#) gives us a once in a generation opportunity to ensure that the agency brings their management of public lands across New Mexico and the West into balance. The rule puts conservation on equal footing with [other uses](#), changing future BLM planning and management. The BLM will have to manage for resilient ecosystems, which includes protecting intact landscapes and land health. The proposed rule identifies tools to advance this direction focused on conservation management, including: [Areas of Critical Environmental Concern \(ACEC\)](#), [mitigation](#), [restoration](#), and [conservation leasing](#).

In New Mexico using these tools would give communities the ability to advocate for the protection of some of our state's most cherished lands through local planning processes. These lands include:

Areas of Environmental Concerns:

- **Birds of Prey Grasslands Proposed ACEC:** The Birds of Prey Grasslands proposed ACEC – totaling 349,355 acres – contains significant grasslands and an extraordinarily high diversity of raptors and other birds. The area is located between two principal routes of the Central Flyway, which is one of four waterfowl flyways in North America.
- **Carlsbad Chihuahuan Desert Rivers Proposed ACEC:** The Carlsbad Chihuahuan Desert Rivers proposed ACEC – totaling 108,474 acres – includes the riparian corridors of the Delaware, Pecos, and Black rivers. The ACEC would protect cultural, historic, scenic, plant and animal, geologic, paleontological, soil, karst, and riparian resources.
- **Salt Playas Proposed ACEC:** The Salt Playas proposed ACEC – totaling 49,772 acres – would protect Carlsbad’s salt lakes, which serve as essential stops for migratory shorebirds and have significant archeological and historical values.
- **Caja del Rio ACECs:** Two ACECs just outside of Santa Fe are known for petroglyphs dating back 8,000 years, other cultural resources, wildlife and special status species, geologic features, and scenic values. The La Cieneguilla Petroglyph Site, located within the Caja del Rio, was recently [vandalized again](#), and Pueblo leaders are asking for more patrols and resources to protect this site.
- **Greater Chaco ACECs:** Chaco Canyon was designated in 1987 as one of 24 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the United States based on its importance as the center of Puebloan cultural and economic life during the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries. The area holds thousands of artifacts and archaeological sites—some of which have yet to be identified and studied. Many tribes throughout the Four Corners are the direct descendants of the Chacoan people and consider the region their traditional homelands. The BLM’s current management plan, adopted in 2003, designated 79 ACECs within the Greater Chaco landscape to protect cultural resources. Unfortunately, these ACECs are small and fail to protect landscape-scale features of cultural importance. Since [2014](#), the BLM has been working to revise the management plan. However, the BLM rejected a 2014 nomination for a landscape-level ACEC, and the agency issued a draft plan in 2020 that declined to consider additional ACEC designations and included numerous exemptions for oil and gas drilling.



Otero Mesa, New Mexico
Photo: New Mexico Wild Joelle Marier

Backcountry Conservation Areas (BCAs):

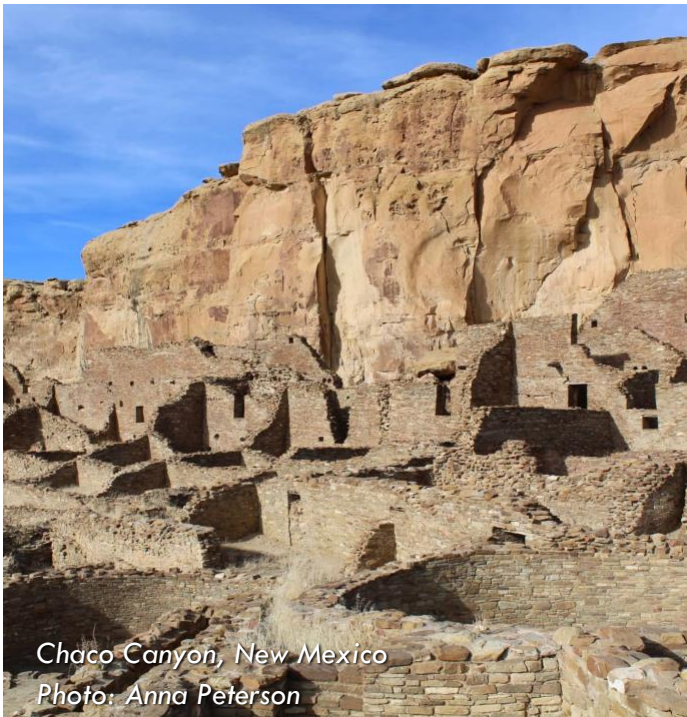
- Otero Mesa has long been a priority for sportsmen groups like [New Mexico Wildlife Federation](#) and has been proposed as a BCA since 2016.
- Conservation and sportsperson groups have proposed three additional BCAs in southeast New Mexico as part of the BLM's TriCounty resource management planning process, including the Blackhawk Ridge, Grasslands, and Brokeoff proposed BCAs in the agency's Las Cruces field office.

Lands with Wilderness Character

- The BLM has also-identified hundreds of thousands of acres of Lands with Wilderness Character that could be designated as WSAs. These include wildlands in Rio San Antonio East, located in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, and portions of the greater Otero Mesa complex east of Las Cruces.

New Mexico Supports BLM Conservation

Lawmakers, [businesses](#), and others across New Mexico want to see more administrative protections by the BLM. Last year, Senator Heinrich led a group of western Senators who sent the Administration [a letter](#) encouraging them to do more to protect more lands managed by the BLM. Similarly, Representatives Leger Fernández and Stansbury also joined 40 members of the House of Representatives in submitting a [letter](#) to the Administration calling for more conservation of BLM lands.



Chaco Canyon, New Mexico
Photo: Anna Peterson

In addition to our congressional leaders and businesses, local elected officials who live in communities that depend upon BLM lands have also called for greater protections. In May of 2022, New Mexico elected officials joined 120 of their western peers in a [letter](#) calling for greater BLM conservation.

There is growing momentum across New Mexico and around the West for bold conservation action by the BLM. This action will be critical to ensure the economic and environmental future of communities across the state. As the Albuquerque Journal pointed out in [an editorial](#) published in January 2023, the time is now for “true BLM leadership” to protect critical land across the state. Similarly, former Albuquerque Mayor

and BLM Director, Jim Baca also called for bold conservation action by the BLM. In [an op-ed](#) in the Albuquerque Journal Baca noted, “we need the BLM to lead from the front and prioritize meaningful conservation. There is no better place to start this work than here in New Mexico.”