

Society for American Archaeology protests BLM movement in Chaco Culture Region

Written by Staff Reports

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In a letter to the Bureau of Land Management's New Mexico State Office dated Sept. 25, the Society for American Archaeology expressed its opposition to the BLM moving forward with a new Resource Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement for the sale of oil and gas extraction leases in the Mancos Shale area (northern New Mexico) in the Chaco Culture region. The SAA is a consulting party to the BLM process, and our Mancos Shale Task Force has been involved from the beginning.

Specifically, the SAA calls BLM's attention to the plan's serious shortcomings:

- Even the best management option presented would still fail to provide adequate protection for the heritage resources of the region;

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- Consultation with stakeholder groups, including Tribes, pursued by the BLM during the pandemic was wholly inadequate;
- The BLM commissioned an ethnographic study to ensure that all Register-eligible sites in the impact area are identified, but is issuing the RMP without waiting for its completion. This is especially serious and will result in the exposure of additional National Register-eligible resources to damage or destruction; and
- The draft RMP does not adequately address the adverse impacts of increased development on the cultural resources of the area.

“We believe everyone benefits from protecting heritage areas like the Chaco Canyon area,” SAA President Joe E. Watkins said. “We’re disappointed that the BLM has chosen to go ahead without waiting for the ethnographic studies it has commissioned to be completed.

“We urge the BLM to give Tribes the chance to complete the studies before it makes any leasing decisions,” he added.

Chaco Canyon was the center of a thriving society that flourished in the Four Corners region of New Mexico from 850-1250 C.E. Chaco Canyon and several of the outlying great houses are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The region has deep spiritual and cultural importance to contemporary Pueblo people and many Native American Tribes, including the Navajo, Apache, and Ute.