

Land swap receives bipartisan support

Written by By Laura Paskus NM Political Report
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The New Mexico State Land Office and the U.S. Department of the Interior are working out the details on a land trade involving more than 120,000 acres in the state, including some lands within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and the Sabinoso Wilderness.

State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn announced this week that the federal government approved an agreement to transfer 43,000 acres of state-owned lands and mineral leases within the monument and the wilderness to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

In return, New Mexico will gain about 78,000 acres in 13 counties from the BLM.

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Of the state trust lands “locked” within the national monument, Dunn said 25 percent of those aren’t currently leased for grazing. That means New Mexico isn’t earning all the income it could, he said, adding that “because of the way it’s checkerboarded with BLM, it’s hard to develop other things, like gravel or any other uses.”

The State Land Office administers nine million acres of surface lands and 13 million acres of subsurface mineral rights. Those lands are managed to provide money for the state land trust, which fund schools, universities and hospitals.

Once the transfer is complete, the BLM can develop official trails and signs in that section of Rio Grande del Norte, Dunn said, and open access into the Sabinoso Wilderness.

“We’re a little disappointed that we had to take so many scattered tracts, but we took what was on their disposal list,” said Dunn, a Republican. “In a lot of places, [the tracts] have adjacent state lands, so we can block some of our lands.”

The plans aren’t a “done deal” yet, he said. Appraisals still need to be completed, and there will be public meetings. Not everyone will be happy, he added.

“I’ve gotten pretty big blowback for the leases, because we charge more for grazing than BLM, and our leases come due every five years,” Dunn said. “The grazing community is probably not going to be happy.”

He explained that counties “losing” federal lands will also lose PILT money, or “payments in lieu of taxes” that the federal government makes to local governments to offset the lack of property taxes. Conversely, by getting more federal acreage, Rio Arriba and Taos counties will gain PILT money.

SABINOSO SWAP DECISION COMING SOON

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“These land swaps were a long time in coming,” said Garrett VeneKlasen, executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. “I oftentimes don’t agree with what Aubrey Dunn does, but him pushing that forward is a good thing.”

[VeneKlasen announced earlier this year](#) that he’s running for Commissioner for State Lands, seeking the Democratic nomination. Dunn does not plan to run again for that office when his term ends in December 2018.

VeneKlasen also called the land swap “integral” to other discussions related to the wilderness area.

Currently, New Mexicans are waiting for Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to complete a separate land transfer adjacent to the Sabinoso Wilderness. Congress designated the 16,000-acre wilderness in 2009, but the public hasn’t been able to visit the area’s canyons and mesas because the federal lands are “landlocked” by private lands.

Eight years ago, the BLM contacted the Wilderness Land Trust about buying the adjacent Rimrock Rose Ranch and donating those lands to the federal government. The sale went through in 2015, and during the administration of President Barack Obama, then-Secretary Sally Jewell approved the donation. All that remained for Zinke was to transfer the deed.

New Mexico’s senators [brought Zinke to Sabinoso this summer](#) and urged him to do so. Afterwards, the secretary said he “intend(ed) to finalize the process to consider whether to accept” the donation. [At that time,](#) his spokeswoman, Heather Swift, said the BLM needed to complete environmental studies and she predicted the process would take three to four months. In response to followup questions this week, Swift referred *NM Political Report* to an August press release.

VeneKlasen, whose group also was involved in the Sabinoso trip, anticipates the secretary will

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act on Sabinoso within weeks. “Sooner, rather than later, the public is going to have permanent easement to that remarkable place,” he said.

New Mexico’s senators, both Democrats, also praised Dunn’s land transfer with the BLM.

“This land exchange is a welcome step, and it was done with the hope and understanding that we will soon finalize the Sabinoso land donation to provide public access to this pristine landscape,” Sen. Tom Udall said in a statement to *NM Political Report*. “New Mexico’s hikers, hunters, sportsmen and women, and lovers of the outdoors deserve access to the Sabinoso Wilderness.

Udall said he continues to be in touch with Zinke and is optimistic Sabinoso will soon be unlocked.

The state’s land trade isn’t necessary for the private land donation to move forward, but Sen. Martin Heinrich’s office said it would contribute to a “shared goal” of greater access to public lands.

“I am pleased that the State Land Office and the Bureau of Land Management are working together and commend Commissioner Dunn and Acting Director Seidlitz for facilitating this land exchange to allow greater public use of lands within the Rio Grande National Monument and the Sabinoso Wilderness and ensure that these places are fully protected for future generations,” Heinrich said in a statement to *NM Political Report*. “Exchanges like this provide increased opportunities to generate funding for schools from state trust lands and improved management of and access to public land.”

Last year, Heinrich introduced a bill to facilitate land exchanges between states and federal agencies. Co-sponsored with Sen. Jeff Flake, R-AZ, the [Advancing Conservation and Education Act](#) focused on state trust land inholdings within areas like national parks and monuments, and wilderness areas.

Heinrich said he plans to introduce similar legislation this year.

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“Inholdings present challenges for both public land managers and state trust land commissioners because differing policies and missions of the respective agencies can lead to conflicts over management,” Heinrich said. “By exchanging state inholdings for land outside of protected areas that is more appropriate for development and more likely to produce revenue, the ACE Act will solidify protections for designated areas like national parks and wilderness while increasing revenues for state trust land beneficiaries like schools and hospitals.”

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