

Tall in the saddle: Tributes to Sen. Tom Udall for his years of service

Written by Staff Reports

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HONORED for his environmental efforts, support for THE NAVAJO Nation

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Senator Martin Heinrich, D-N.M. has served alongside Senator Tom Udall, D-N.M. in the U.S. Senate since 2013 and in the New Mexico Congressional Delegation since 2009. When he thanked him for his service in prepared remarks made Dec. 8, the day Udall made his farewell speech, Heinrich painted a picture of a man who sat tall in the saddle:

“One of the first times I ever spent any serious time with Tom Udall was actually on horseback.

Tom was serving at that time as the Congressman for northern New Mexico’s 3rd District, while I was leading the Coalition for New Mexico Wilderness.

Together, we rode into the rugged mesas and canyons east of Las Vegas, N. M. that we both hoped could soon be designated as the Sabinoso Wilderness.

It was clear right away that he shared my sense of wonder in wild places and a strong commitment to protect precious landscapes for future generations.

And despite his day job walking the halls of Congress, he was pretty comfortable on that horse of his.

More than a decade later, Tom and I would repeat that horseback ride in the Sabinoso alongside President Trump’s then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.

We were both serving together in the Senate by this point.

And we had successfully worked together to establish not just the Sabinoso Wilderness, but also the Ojito, the Columbine-Hondo, the Valles Caldera National Preserve, and the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks and Rio Grande del Norte National Monuments.

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Now we were trying to convince Zinke—someone I might describe as a wilderness skeptic—to sign off on the Bureau of Land Management’s acceptance of a generous land donation by the Wilderness Land Trust,” Heinrich explained.

This land donation would finally open up public access to the spectacular opportunities in the Sabinoso—which was then totally landlocked by private lands, and it would substantially grow the Sabinoso Wilderness Area.

A couple hours of both of us riding into Canyon Largo alongside Zinke, local sportsmen, public lands advocates, and community leaders accomplished what months of testy congressional hearings and office meetings here in Washington could not.

Just days after his visit, Secretary Zinke announced that his reservations over accepting new wilderness were assuaged and that he would approve the donation,” Heinrich said.

Heinrich was joined in his praise for New Mexico’s Senior Senator by members of the Navajo Nation, including Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez.

“Senator Udall has been a champion for the Navajo people and Indian Country on many critical issues over the years including land conservation and restoration, uranium mining clean-up and health impacts, and with the COVID-19 pandemic on the Navajo Nation. I cannot thank him enough for his great leadership and for always advocating and supporting the Navajo people. As the Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, he continues to support and address many issues for all tribal nations. I wish him and his family the very best as they move forward,” Nez said.

For his part, Udall told some stories that day.

“As I talk about my love of the land, I cannot neglect to acknowledge how much I have learned from the original stewards of this land – Native Americans. I got my start in politics working with

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my father, fighting alongside the Navajo uranium miners who had been hurt by this nation's nuclear weapons program. My work as Vice Chair of the Indian Affairs Committee has been the honor of a lifetime. The federal government's obligation to uphold its trust and treaty obligations is sacred.

"Some of my proudest achievements have been the result of working with tribal leaders to advance Indian Country's priorities and to support New Mexico's 23 Tribes," Udall said.

To view Sen. Udall's farewell speech, please visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_FkbhTeBHzM&feature=youtu.be