State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn got it wrong. And so did the Albuquerque Journal.

New Mexico’s state land commissioner, Aubrey Dunn, was in charge of 9 million acres of state Trust Land and is required to manage them to optimize revenues for the beneficiaries of the trust, which include schools, universities, hospitals and other public institutions.

“State trust land is not ‘public land’ and is not accessible by the general public unless permitted by my office. …Given the State Land Office’s wholly unproductive and ineffective management of these lands, the state would like to see the Trust Lands returned to its rightful owners, New Mexico’s schoolchildren.…”

“While Dunn’s reaction may be a little over the top, he is correct to note that 1,280 acres proposed for wilderness are state Trust Lands. …But while it would be a shame to let the wild lands within the monument, the federal government should not expect to trade lands with income-producing potential from the state without compensation.”

—Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board, May 1, 2016

State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn came out with rhetorical guns blazing this week when it was announced that state Trust Land was among two areas within the Rio Grande National Monument near Taos that were included in the U.S. Senate’s energy bill for wilderness status, calling the move a ‘land grab’ that is ‘tantamount to a slap in the face of New Mexico’s schoolchildren…”

“While Dunn is correct to note that 1,280 acres proposed for wilderness are state Trust Lands, it is not necessary to let the wild lands within the monument, the federal government should not expect to trade lands with income-producing potential from the state without compensation.”

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But the little revenue these state Trust Lands are currently producing comes from grazing fees, and that is all.

3. Though they don’t yet enjoy permanent protection through legislation, the federal lands are already being managed as Wilderness by the Bureau of Land Management.

4. It is true that state lands are being turned over to the federal government, which is going to manage them as wilderness. But there is no guarantee that Dunn will ever be able to manage the lands the way he was able to manage state lands.

5. In no way could this be considered a “land grab” since there are already federal laws protecting the land.

6. The land proposed to be permanently protected as Wilderness (representing 21,420 acres or approximately 5 percent of the national monument) consists of the most natural and remote gnis.

It is true that there are 1,280 acres of state land within the proposed Wilderness areas in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. Unfortunately, that is about the only thing that Dunn has gotten right.

Commissioner Dunn’s support of the transfer of millions of acres of our public lands to the state, to be leased for energy and mineral development by private corporations, is what could be construed as a “land grab.” It has been far more effective to focus on the state’s being able to manage the state’s own lands.

The facts:

1. If the Cerros Bill becomes law, the state of New Mexico will still own, manage and have access to these Trust Lands.

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6. The federal government isn’t “taking” state lands so there is no need for “compensation.”

A recent BIPARTISAN public opinion poll conducted by Public Opinion Strategies, a Republican polling firm, and Fairbank and Associates, a Democratic polling firm, found that more than 2 out of 3 New Mexicans oppose the state control of public lands and don’t think it is “fair or fiscally responsible” for the state to foot the bill for managing America’s public lands (68 percent opposed, 26 percent in favor).

Voters in the Land of Enchantment truly do seem spellbound by the state.

They cite the environment and the healthy, outdoor lifestyle as the most significant factors why they choose to live in New Mexico. In fact, 80 percent of New Mexicans want protecting and conserving natural areas for future generations is very important.

The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance will continue to fight for permanent legislative protections for these wilderness treasures. We will continue to shine the light on misinformation and deceit. We will continue to hold elected officials like Commissioner Dunn accountable. We vow to continue to speak up for our increasing rare and threatened wild places.

You can help us do this by making a donation to the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance online at nmwild.org. Your gift is tax deductible as allowed by law. Your generosity will be matched by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, however you choose to give, up to $1,000.

To learn more about the state’s Trust Lands, see our website at nmwild.org.

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May 2016 Advisory Newsletter

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