

June 23, 2025

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington D.C. 20240

RE: Potential Revocation of Public Land Order 7923 for Public Lands Withdrawal Surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park

Dear Secretary Burgum:

On behalf of the undersigned New Mexico elected officials, we urge you not to revoke Public Land Order 7923 for Public Lands Withdrawal Surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park, in whole or in part, or remove or loosen any of its management protections. Finalized in 2023, this action administratively withdrew more than 336,000 acres of federal lands and minerals within a 10-mile radius of Chaco Culture National Historical Park from future oil and gas leasing for a period of 20 years. This landmark decision responded to decades of efforts from Tribes, elected officials, and our communities to protect the sacred and historic sites and Tribal communities living in northwest New Mexico, and the greater connected landscape with a rich Pueblo, Tribal Nation, and cultural legacy. It was established after extensive tribal consultation and a thorough and careful environmental review, including 6 public meetings and two public comment periods totaling 150 days.

Pueblos and Tribes, including the Navajo Nation, worked for decades to establish these protections. Until recently, the Pueblos and the Navajo Nation were united in protecting the Greater Chaco Region. The Navajo Nation worked closely with the All Pueblo Council of Governors to develop the proposal for the 10-mile buffer zone around Chaco Culture National Historical Park, [which was initially a compromise](#), until the Navajo Nation changed its position.

It is critical that the Department of the Interior does not revoke or modify this withdrawal – which safeguards one of the most sacred and culturally significant landscapes in the United States.

Centuries ago, Greater Chaco was the epicenter of incredible Indigenous achievements, leading to vast great houses, kivas, rooms, and roads throughout the Four Corners region, many of which remain visible today. In fact, the protected 10-mile radius area is home to over 4,000 archaeological and historic sites. Since only one fifth of the area has been surveyed, the actual number is likely much higher. Today, the area remains integral to the ongoing cultural practices of the Pueblo, Hopi, Zuni and other tribes throughout the Southwest. The withdrawal prevents further degradation of the Chaco Culture UNESCO World Heritage Site, portions of the vast Chacoan road network, and thousands of cultural, scientific, and spiritual resources.

Opening these lands to oil and gas development would not only desecrate sacred ground and the thousands of cultural sites within the withdrawal area, but it would harm the local economy and public health. In 2023 alone, [visitors to Chaco contributed](#) more than \$3.2 million in economic output, supporting dozens of jobs in surrounding communities.

Additionally, the public health consequences of continued oil and gas drilling in the Greater Chaco region are concerning. Living in proximity to oil and gas development threatens community health by releasing harmful air pollutants, which can lead to greater risks of asthma, adverse pregnancy outcomes, and cancers. In the Greater Chaco region, these risks are a reality, as oil and gas drilling creeps closer to our communities' doorsteps. Worse yet, Indigenous communities already bearing the brunt of these health impacts would be hit hardest by continued drilling in the area.

Furthermore, there is overwhelming support for the mineral withdrawal. Over 160,000 comments from people across New Mexico and the country were submitted during the comment period in support of the withdrawal. The entire New Mexico congressional delegation – Senators Ben Ray Lujan and Martin Heinrich and Representatives Teresa Leger Fernández, Melanie Stansbury, and Gabe Vasquez – supported the withdrawal, and the delegation also recently reintroduced the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act, which would permanently protect the federal lands encompassed by the administrative withdrawal. The legislation was originally introduced in 2018 and passed with bipartisan support by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2019.

Most of the federal lands surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park have already been drilled. Over the past few decades, BLM has leased [over 90 percent](#) of federal lands surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park for drilling, and oil and gas companies have [drilled](#) more than 37,000 wells in the area and built a sprawling network of roads. Much of the landscape has been degraded, destroying significant cultural features, transforming cultural sites into industrial parks, poisoning local communities' air and water, and flooding the night sky with light from drilling infrastructure. In fact, federal lands within the withdrawal area are some of the last unleased and undeveloped lands in all of Northwestern New Mexico.

Lastly, the withdrawal only affects federal lands – not allottee lands, Navajo lands, or private lands – and is subject to valid existing rights on those lands. The withdrawal does not prevent the Department of the Interior from issuing oil and gas leases for Tribes or allottees, and, in fact, allottee lands in the area have recently been leased for drilling.

In conclusion, keeping this withdrawal in place would protect myriad sacred cultural resources, safeguard community health, support New Mexico's economy, and would not impact existing land ownership or Tribal allottee development of nearby lands for oil and gas.

On behalf of our New Mexico constituents and communities, we urge you to not revoke, in whole or in part, the Chaco administrative mineral withdrawal, or remove or loosen any of its vital management protections.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Peter Wirth
New Mexico Senate Majority Leader

Reena Szczepanski
New Mexico House Majority Leader

Mimi Stewart
New Mexico Senate President Pro Tempore

Joaquin Baca
Albuquerque City Councilor, District 2

Barbara Baca
Bernalillo County Commissioner, District 1

Adriann Barboa
Bernalillo County Commissioner, District 3

Heather Berghmans
New Mexico State Senator, District 15

Johana Bencomo
Mayor Pro Tem, City of Las Cruces

Jamie Cassutt
Santa Fe City Councilor, District 4

Kathleen Cates
New Mexico State Representative, District 44

Guadalupe Cano
Silver City Town Councilor, District 4

Angel Charley
New Mexico State Senator, District 30

Eleanor Chávez
New Mexico State Representative, District 26

Pilar Faulkner
Santa Fe City Councilor, District 3

Tammy Fiebelkorn
Albuquerque City Councilor, District 7

Joy Garratt
New Mexico State Representative, District 29

Carrie Hamblen
New Mexico State Senator, District 38

Russell Hernandez
Mayor, Town of Mesilla

Joseph Hernandez
New Mexico State Representative, District 4

Hank Hughes
Santa Fe County Commissioner, District 5

Adam Johnson
Santa Fe County Commissioner, District 4

Tara Lujan
New Mexico State Representative, District 48

Charlotte Little
New Mexico State Representative, District 68

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New Mexico State Representative, District 50

Marian Matthews
New Mexico State Representative, District 27

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Max Trujillo
San Miguel County Commissioner, District 3

Alan Webber
Mayor, City of Santa Fe

Cc: Senator Martin Heinrich
 Senator Ben Ray Luján
 Representative Teresa Leger Fernández
 Representative Melanie Stansbury
 Representative Gabe Vasquez
 Melanie Barnes
 Maureen Joe
 Jeff Tafoya