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WILDERNESS SOCIETY * TOGETHER FOR BROTHERS

June 23, 2025

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

Dear Secretary Burgum:

We are writing to urge you in the strongest possible terms to maintain all existing protections contained in the 20-year administrative withdrawal of federal lands and minerals within the 10-mile buffer zone around Chaco Culture National Historical Park (NHP). Chaco is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and merits the highest levels of protection. For more than fifteen years, members of the undersigned groups, representing thousands of New Mexicans and Americans across the country, have been working to safeguard the Greater Chaco landscape, in support of the efforts of the All Pueblo Council of Governors and numerous individual Pueblos and Tribes and their tribal members.

The Greater Chaco landscape is central to the identity and spiritual life of many Indigenous communities in the Southwest and represents centuries of Pueblo history. The current mineral withdrawal was achieved after years of collaborative efforts by Tribal Nations, the All Pueblo Council of Governors, advocates, Indigenous and frontline organizations, and elected officials. This carefully crafted protection represents a balanced approach that safeguards sacred sites and places while respecting Tribal sovereignty—with no restrictions placed on allottees or private landowners, who can still freely use and develop their own lands.

This sacred landscape has already suffered tremendous harm. Over the past few decades, the Bureau of Land Management has leased over 90 percent of federal lands surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park (NHP) for drilling. Oil and gas companies have drilled more than 37,000 wells in the area and built a sprawling network of roads spanning 15,000 miles—five times the distance from Los Angeles to New York. This expanding development has destroyed significant cultural sites and transformed others into industrial parks. Pollution from flares and leaking infrastructure endanger the health of the Indigenous and frontline communities who have lived in the area for centuries. Additionally, gas flaring lights up Chaco Culture NHP's night skies, which are protected by an International Dark Sky designation.

However, oil and gas development starts to become much less pervasive beginning about 10 miles from the boundary of Chaco Culture NHP, and the 10-mile protection zone is helping to ensure that roughly 4,200 known archaeological, cultural, and historic sites are protected. Only 20 percent of the protection zone has been surveyed for cultural resources, so the actual number of sites is certainly much higher. Reducing the area of mineral withdrawal to a 5-mile zone, for example, would place over half of these sites at risk.

We have been proud to stand in solidarity with the All Pueblo Council of Governors, frontline community members, and many other Indigenous peoples and nations to support efforts to protect the Greater Chaco landscape, as well as the 160,000 people and organizations across the country who filed comments in support of the withdrawal in 2022.

For all of these reasons, we respectfully urge you to maintain the existing 20-year mineral withdrawal that protects the Greater Chaco region from new oil and gas leasing on federal lands and minerals within the 10-mile buffer zone and take further steps to protect cultural resources and Native communities in the broader Chaco landscape from the ongoing impacts of oil and gas development.

Chaco Canyon transcends politics—it is a place of reverence that is beloved throughout our nation. The 20-year mineral withdrawal represents years of careful tribal consultation, a tribally led ethnographic study, collaborative design, and thoughtful balancing of multiple uses. It provides essential protection for sacred sites and cultural resources while respecting Tribal sovereignty and development rights.

We urge you to maintain this vital protection and honor the years of public engagement that led to this landmark decision. The stakes could not be higher for the preservation of this irreplaceable cultural landscape and the health and well-being of surrounding communities.

We look forward to your response and stand ready to provide any additional information you may need.

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