

Udall to protect Chaco Canyon, prioritize local services

Written by Staff Report
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WASHINGTON, D.C. – During a hearing of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, on which he serves as the lead Democratic member, U.S. Senator Tom Udall pressed Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Director Neil Kornze about concerns New Mexicans have raised about oil and gas leasing near Chaco Canyon and about a possible BLM proposal to merge the New Mexico and Arizona state offices May 13.

Udall, an advocate for responsible oil and gas development, wrote to Secretary of Interior Sally Jewell, asking her to send top-level officials to New Mexico to hear from the community about how oil and gas development could impact the Chaco Culture National Historical Park and archaeological sites associated with the ancient Chaco people as the BLM works on a new Resource Management Plan for the area.

At today's hearing, Udall reminded Kornze of the letter and again asked for the Interior Department to "take a personal look at this issue and come to New Mexico to hear the concerns of our constituents."

In response, Kornze committed to working with Udall to ensure that oil and gas leasing near this iconic site is handled with the utmost consideration of Chaco Canyon's archaeological value. As BLM completes its new Resource Management Plan for the San Juan Basin, Kornze said the agency will make sure to take increased potential for shale oil and gas production near Chaco into account.

Udall said at the hearing: "Chaco Canyon is critically important to my state as an incredibly rich cultural destination, as well as a sacred place to the tribes of the southwest. But as you know, Chaco Canyon is situated right in one of the most productive oil and gas production areas in the country. It appears that many new leases are getting closer to the Chaco Culture National Historical Park, which really concerns me."

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Udall also reminded Kornze that he and many others in New Mexico believe a possible BLM proposal to merge the New Mexico and Arizona state offices could negatively affect the state.

“I am very skeptical of this idea,” Udall continued. “Having a state director in New Mexico - focused on New Mexico’s many unique public lands issues - has served us well for decades. Many New Mexico stakeholders, including former bureau managers, are concerned that a merger would mean less [time] for a state director to focus on New Mexico, and I share those concerns.”

Kornze told Udall that “no decisions have been made” on the merger and that BLM is committed to prioritizing local services for New Mexicans.

The hearing was part of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies’ ongoing work to hear testimony and question agency officials in preparation for drafting legislation to fund the BLM and other agencies for Fiscal Year 2016.