



July 10, 2008

Bill Childress, Manager
Las Cruces District Office
Bureau of Land Management
1800 Marquess Street
Las Cruces, NM 88005-3370

Dear Mr. Childress:

As the Governor of New Mexico, I have been a strong advocate for the preservation of Otero Mesa's wildlife, desert grassland ecosystems, and precious fresh water aquifer, the Salt Basin. I have proposed the creation of a National Conservation Area on Otero Mesa, but that protective step has not been taken. I am writing today to support the efforts of the Coalition for Otero Mesa to have the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) designate an Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). This type of designation would provide another way to protect the area's wildlife habitat, wilderness characteristics, and critical groundwater supply, focusing on the importance of this thriving desert ecosystem.

The Otero Mesa area lies within the Chihuahuan Desert ecoregion, one of the most biologically diverse arid regions in the world. This is a vital area, home to mule deer, pronghorn, aplomado falcons, black-tailed prairie dogs, burrowing owls and other wildlife. It has a rich history, including being home to Native Americans who left petroglyphs on the volcanic rocks and providing a stop along the Butterfield Overland Express stage line. Otero Mesa contains the best remaining Chihuahuan grassland in New Mexico. Also, Otero Mesa harbors under its surface potentially hundreds of millions of gallons of water, enough to provide a sustainable fresh water supply for communities in southern New Mexico.

New Mexico is committed to protecting its natural areas, including through responsible management of the environment on Otero Mesa. I believe that an ACEC designation for Otero Mesa will help to preserve New Mexico's cultural resources, since the archeological studies of this area are nowhere near complete and Native American communities have expressed concern in preserving their ancestral lands.

ACEC designation is an important tool that the BLM can use to recognize relevant and important values on our public lands and commit to protecting them through special management attention. I urge the BLM to consider how best to safeguard this unique landscape for the future, including consideration of an ACEC designation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill Richardson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bill Richardson
Governor of New Mexico