

## United States Senate

April 16, 2007

The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Mail Stop 6242  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

Dear Secretary Kempthorne:

I am writing as a follow-up to our meeting several weeks ago in which we discussed Otero Mesa and the ongoing study of the Salt Basin Aquifer which underlies the area.

As you know, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) are moving forward with an in-depth study that I requested of the Salt Basin Aquifer. USGS recently issued a preliminary report in which it identified the specific parameters needing more study. The report also reiterates that the Salt Basin may potentially hold as much as 15 million acre-feet of potable and recoverable groundwater, equivalent to a 156-year water supply. Over \$100,000 has already been committed to the effort by both USGS and the ISC, and Governor Bill Richardson recently secured \$1 million to help the study move forward.

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Record of Decision concerning oil and gas leasing within Otero Mesa specifically sets out that BLM has a responsibility to protect groundwater resources that might be affected by such leasing. Before issuing any permits to drill, BLM is to determine where fresh aquifers are located so that it can ensure that adequate protections for groundwater quality and quantity are incorporated into its drilling permits. Rather than performing this task separately from ongoing studies, BLM should actively support the USGS-ISC initiative and provide resources so that specific information needed in the proposed lease areas is secured. To this end, I urge you to defer oil and gas leasing or permitting decisions within Otero Mesa until the USGS-ISC study is completed.

I appreciate your consideration of my request and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jeff Bingaman  
United States Senator