

*Nomination for the:*

*Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife  
Area of Critical Environmental Concern*



Submitted to:  
Bureau of Land Management  
Las Cruces Field Office  
1800 Marquess  
Las Cruces, NM 88005

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Submitted by:  
The Coalition for Otero Mesa

## **I. Introduction on the Need to Protect Otero Mesa Desert Grasslands through an Area of Critical Environmental Concern Designation**

The unique and valuable resources of the Otero Mesa desert grasslands merit protection through designation of an Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) comprising 583,837 acres. This area represents an incredible opportunity to preserve one of the last and largest remaining fragments of intact Chihuahuan Desert grasslands in the U.S., along with the many species it supports. Home to a stunning array of grasslands birds, critical colonies of black-tailed prairie dogs, and what is likely New Mexico's last native pronghorn herd, the area's extraordinary values are unmatched in the region. The relatively pristine habitat, robust wildlife populations, and large size of the proposed ACEC would ensure more than the mere survival of these species: if designated, the Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife ACEC would protect a thriving grassland ecosystem of international importance.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) obligates the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to "give priority to the designation and protection of areas of critical environmental concern [ACECs]." 43 U.S.C. § 1712(c)(3). ACECs are areas "where special management is required (when such areas are developed or used or where no development is required) to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources, or other natural systems or processes." 43 U.S.C. § 1702(a).

BLM's guidance provides additional detail on the criteria to be considered in ACEC designation, as discussed in the applicable regulations, as well. *See*, Manual 1613, Section .1 (Characteristics of ACECs); 43 C.F.R. § 8200. An area must possess relevance and importance, and require special management attention to protect its values. The proposed Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife ACEC meets the above requirements. BLM should therefore protect this unique landscape with ACEC designation and highly protective management prescriptions.

A critical piece of the regional ecosystem, the proposed Grasslands Wildlife ACEC contains one of the largest tracts of black grama grassland remaining in the Chihuahuan Desert.<sup>1</sup> The area provides habitat for a unique pronghorn herd, grassland birds such as northern aplomado falcons, ferruginous hawks and burrowing owls, and 11 black-tailed prairie dog colonies, a formerly widespread species now imperiled in the Southwest.<sup>2</sup> The proposed Grasslands Wildlife ACEC also supports a high diversity of cacti and other plants.<sup>3</sup> Because of its relatively pristine habitat, the lands within the Grasslands Wildlife ACEC provide additional opportunities to support the restoration of the endangered northern aplomado falcon to the Southwest. This area also offers hope for restoring desert bighorn sheep to their historic range in New Mexico, as several sites on or adjacent

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<sup>1</sup>Whitford, Walter, and Kevin Bixby. 2005. The last desert grasslands: the biological case for protecting Otero Mesa. Southwest Environmental Center report issued December 2005. Online at: [http://www.oteromesa.org/documents/The\\_Last\\_Desert\\_Grasslands.pdf](http://www.oteromesa.org/documents/The_Last_Desert_Grasslands.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>*Id.*

<sup>3</sup>*Id.*

to Otero Mesa have been identified as potential reintroduction sites for desert bighorn sheep.<sup>4</sup>

These natural values have clear importance to the entire region. Once widespread, Chihuahuan desert grasslands are among the most endangered ecosystems in North America today, transformed by drought, livestock grazing, and habitat conversion into desert scrub.<sup>5</sup> Where grasslands still exist, they are generally too isolated and small to support the full array of wildlife once found on them.<sup>6</sup> The area included in the nominated Grasslands Wildlife ACEC is the exception, providing vital habitat to a variety of plants and animals uniquely adapted to these rare and fragile desert grasslands.<sup>7</sup> Many of these values are unique: wildlife officials believe the Grasslands Wildlife ACEC pronghorn population is one of the few, or perhaps the only, herd of native pronghorns remaining in New Mexico.<sup>8</sup> The area's prairie dogs are a keystone species, essential for maintaining the integrity and functionality of grassland ecosystems. Approximately 140 vertebrate species benefit from prairie dogs and the habitat they create.<sup>9</sup> The added opportunities to facilitate the return of aplomado falcon and desert bighorn sheep populations increase the ecological significance of these lands.

The Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife ACEC's incredible values will not endure without special management attention. Oil and gas development threatens the area's unique ecosystems and wildlife – BLM's plan allows drilling on 95 percent of the area.<sup>10</sup> Impacts from such drilling will be ecologically disastrous, including soil compaction and erosion, loss of soil biota, stress on wildlife, change in wildlife movement and activity patterns, increased poaching of wildlife, reduced plant growth, spills and leaks of produced water and drilling chemicals, habitat fragmentation, penetration of the underlying caliche layer, and the introduction of noxious weeds. These impacts will cause even greater damage to wildlife populations struggling to survive.<sup>11</sup> Though oil

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<sup>4</sup>*Id.*

<sup>5</sup>The Last Desert Grasslands, *op. cit.* See also Hoyt, Cathryn A. 2002. The Chihuahuan Desert: diversity at risk. *Endangered Species Bulletin* 27(2): 16-17; Pidgeon, A.M., N.E. Matthews, R. Benoit, and E.V. Nordheim. 2001. Response of avian communities to historic habitat change in the northern Chihuahuan Desert. *Conservation Biology* 15(6): 1772-1788.

<sup>6</sup>The Last Desert Grasslands, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>*Id.*

<sup>8</sup>*Id.* and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. 2001. Comments on Draft Resource Management Plan Amendment for Fluid Minerals Leasing and Development in Sierra and Otero Counties. Letter dated April 13, 2001. See p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Kotliar, N. B., B. W. Baker, A. D. Whicker, and G. Plumb. 1999. A critical review of assumptions about the prairie dog as a keystone species. *Environmental Management*. 24: 177-192; Kotliar, N. B. 2000. Application of the new keystone-species concept to prairie dogs: How well does it work? *Conservation Biology*. 15: 1715-1721; Kotliar, N. B., B. Miller, R. P. Reading, and T. W. Clark. 2006. The prairie dog as a keystone species. Pages 53-64 in J. L. Hoogland, editor. *Conservation of the black-tailed prairie dog*. Island Press, Washington, D. C.; Miller, B., R. Reading, J. Hoogland, T. Clark, G. Ceballos, R. List, S. Forrest, L. Hanebury, P. Manzano, J. Pacheco, and D. Uresk. 2000. The role of prairie dogs as keystone species: Response to Stapp. *Conservation Biology*. 14: 318-321.

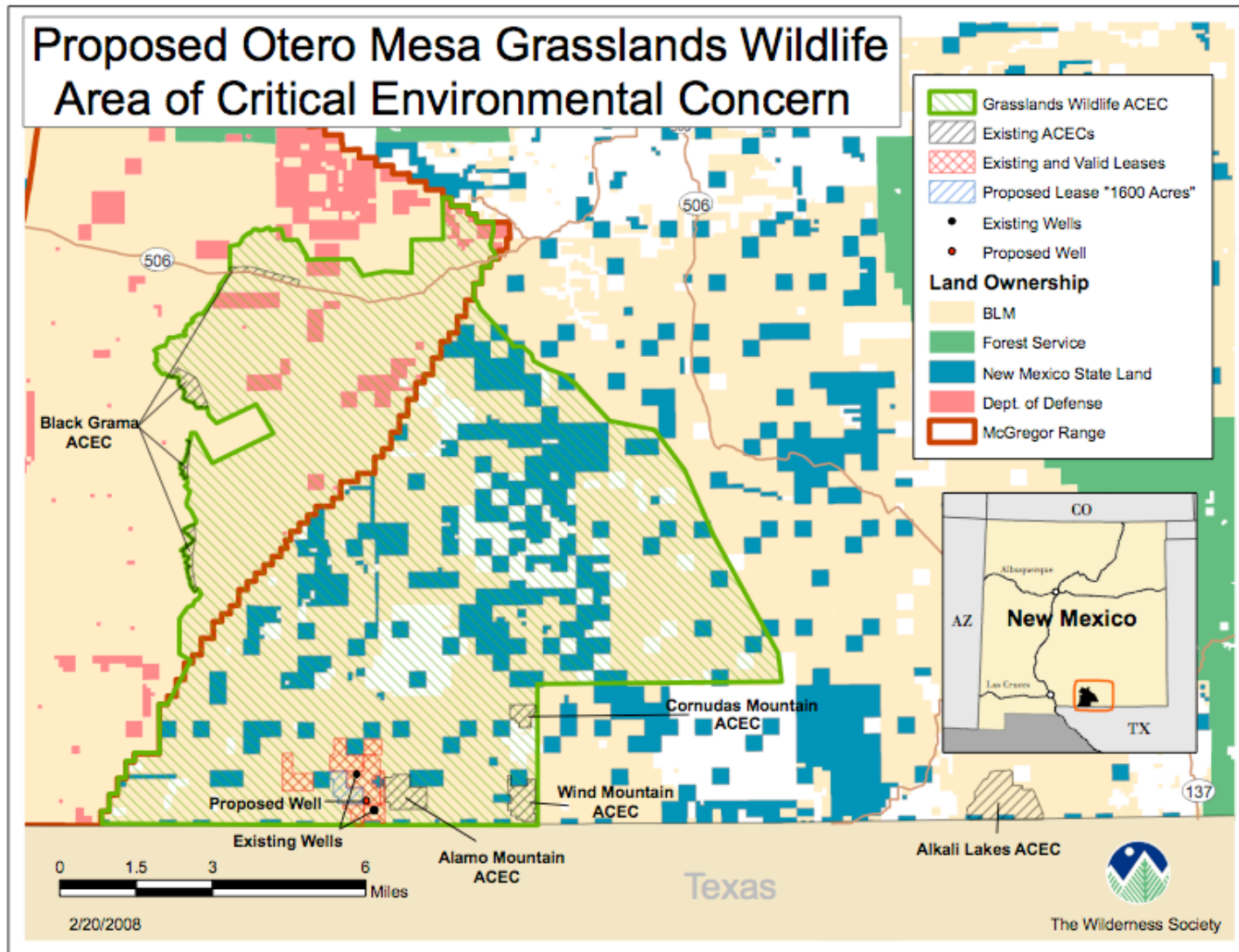
<sup>10</sup>Coalition for Otero Mesa. 2006. Hollow promises in our land of enchantment: why the Bureau of Land Management can't be trusted to protect Otero Mesa. Report released August 2006. Online at: <http://www.oteromesa.org/documents/HollowPromises1.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup>*Id.*; The Last Desert Grasslands, *op. cit.*; and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish 2001, *op. cit.*

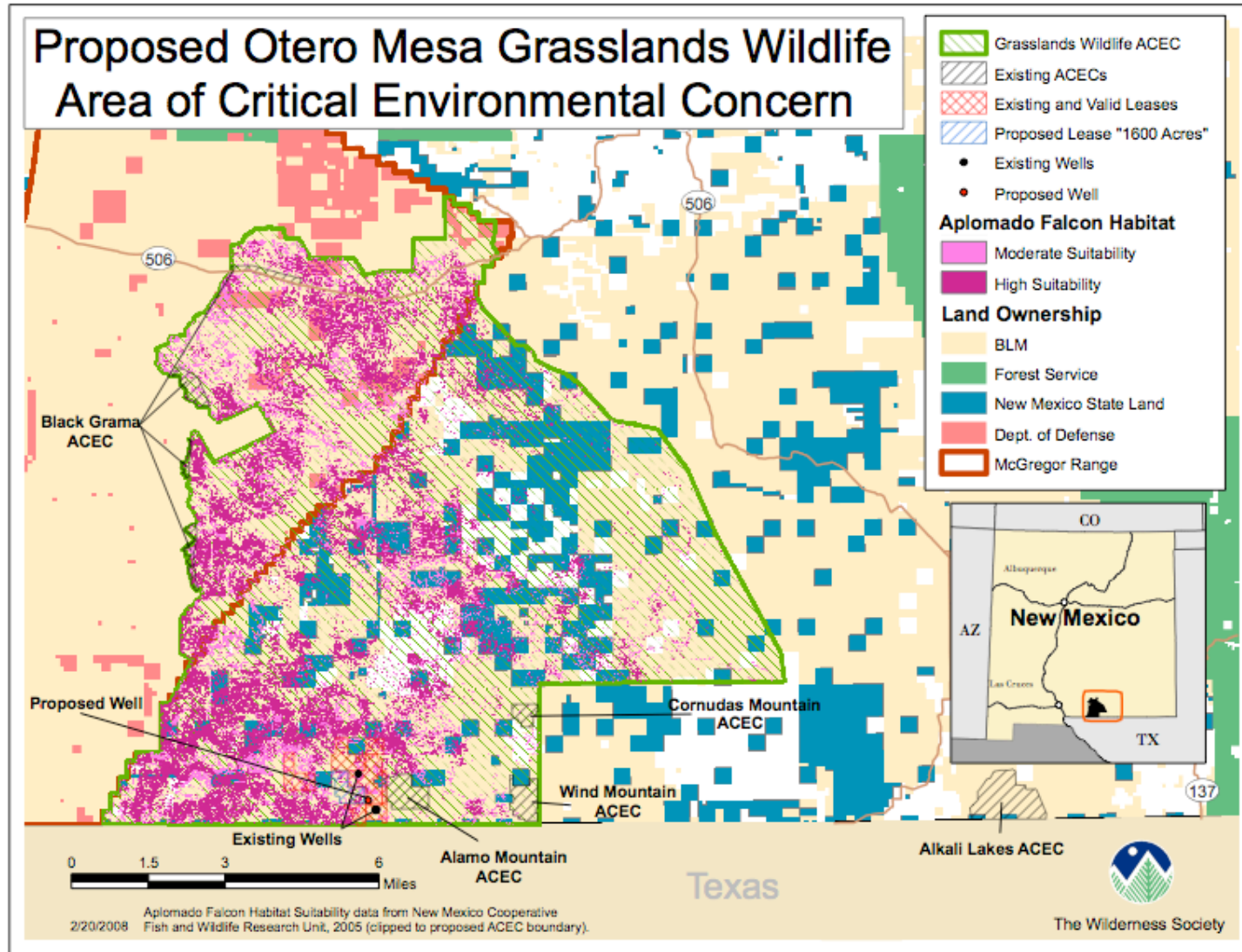
and gas development remains the largest threat, as we describe in this nomination, target shooting, poor grasslands management, sylvatic plague, habitat fragmentation, and fencing are additional problems requiring special attention. The proposed ACEC would address oil and gas drilling and the rest of these threats.

### **Nomination**

Pursuant to FLPMA, 43 U.S.C. § 1701, *et seq.*, the undersigned formally nominate and petition the BLM to designate the below-described area as an ACEC to protect the area's wildlife and grasslands ecosystem (see Maps 1 & 2). We respectfully submit this nomination as part of the ongoing Tri-Country Resource Management Plan revisions and as interested parties, pursuant to BLM Manual 1617.81B (2000) and section 553(e) and 555(e) of the Administrative Procedures Act, 5 U.S.C. § 553(e) *et seq.*, which grants members of the public an independent right to nominate areas of BLM-administered lands for ACEC designation. We have identified this area, which we refer to as the proposed Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife ACEC, as a potential ACEC based on the criteria set out in applicable laws and regulations, and as outlined in BLM Manual 1613.



Map 1. Proposed Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife Area of Critical Environmental Concern.



Map 2. Proposed Otero Mesa Grasslands Wildlife Area of Critical Environmental Concern, showing aplomado falcon habitat.