

OTERO MESA

AMERICA'S NEXT NATIONAL MONUMENT



Finding the Heartbeat of America's Next Great National Monument

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It was the fall of 2001, and I had just arrived at the job, familiar and rough as it was. The day began like any other, where you go in beforehand, knowing what lies ahead. You see, a carpenter measures twice and cuts once. If you screw up, you are sure to hear about it, and trust me when I say the fallout is as windswept as a spring afternoon in southern New Mexico.

I was pouring cement into the cavity of a banco wall on top of which we would lay wood, wire, and stucco later in the afternoon. There was a small radio in the hallway that our foreman would play every day, usually dialed into an NPR broadcast that would later transition into tapes of the Rolling Stones. I was staring up at the ceiling, immense as it was, the freshly installed insulation snugly tacked between each trellis, and then the radio went silent.

This was my September 11 moment.

Two months later, I'm standing on scaffolding with a ragtag group of men, suspended twenty feet from the ground, all of us stressing to hold up a thirty-foot beam that we have to hang in order to raise the roof of the building. There are nine-inch screws that need to be plunged through this beam in order to keep it in place. The air is hot at this height, and it's evident that, as a team, we cannot maintain the

lumber in position too much longer.

With my Makita drill in place, I throw my whole back into it and grip the wood with my palm. The metal of the bolt grabs, sinks, and splinters through. A second later, the drill bit spins off the screw and stabs through my right hand.

Although I didn't know it at the time, this was the beginning of a journey that would set me on course to help save a wild and beautiful grassland known as Otero Mesa.

Not too long after my trip to the emergency room, I was having a conversation with a neighbor of mine on my front porch. Marcus was a middle-aged man, addicted to hard drugs, and, more often than not, he was incoherent and difficult to be around.

The old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover" still rings true, however, for during our conversation that evening, he posed a question to me: "If your heart's not into it, then why are you doing it?" It sounded cliché at first, but it sunk in, much like the drill through my hand, and that question began stirring deep inside me, until I knew that I had to take action.

A few weeks later, I quit my carpenter's job and began knocking on doors, as a canvasser, raising money and awareness for a campaign that the Sierra Club was working on. Having worked in the

construction industry, getting yelled at and having doors slammed in my face actually emboldened me to work harder. As fate, or luck, would have it, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance showed up at the canvassing office and wanted us to knock on doors for this little-known place in the southern part of the state that the Bush administration had slated for full-scale oil and gas development.

The rest is history.

I used to think that there was something magical about Otero Mesa, but now I know better. Otero Mesa is just simply—wild. This land of rolling hills, undulating black grama grass, and endless sky embodies the intoxicating spirit of freedom. It is a land that speaks to the soul, and it is a land that deserves to be permanently protected.

It is a place that captures the imagination and refuses to let go. Put plainly, New Mexico's Otero Mesa is the largest and wildest Chihuahuan Desert grassland left on public lands in the United States.

Located southeast of Alamogordo and west of Carlsbad, and straddling the Texas border, Otero Mesa rises up off the Tularosa basin and stretches out over 1.2 million acres. There are over 1,000 native plant and animal species in the region, including pronghorn, mule deer, mountain lion, coyote, golden eagles, ferruginous hawks, Aplomado falcons, black-tailed

prairie dogs, and close to 250 species of migratory songbirds. The Mescalero Apache and Ysleta del Sur people have an unyielding connection to the area. Testimony of their legacy can still be found today, with inscriptions notched on the thousands of boulders within the Cornudas Mountains. In addition there are several ruins from the historic Butterfield Overland Stagecoach Route.

Furthermore, the Salt Basin Aquifer, which is suspected to be the largest untapped, freshwater aquifer left in the state, lies directly under the grasslands of Otero Mesa. A multiyear study of the basin has commenced in response to a request by Senator Bingaman

and is currently being conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission. Preliminary findings suggest that there are at least fifty-seven million acre-feet of groundwater and that, due to the fractured nature of the geology, the aquifer could be vulnerable to the rapid spread of contamination. The analysis also concluded that further study is imperative to define the location and characteristics of the groundwater. A final report is expected to be issued sometime later this year.

In the spring of 2009, the 10th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals issued a landmark decision in a lawsuit brought by the state of New Mexico and the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance against the federal government over its plans to open Otero Mesa to full-scale oil and gas development. The court found that the Bureau of Land Management's drilling plan failed to provide an option that would have closed the mesa to drilling and that environmental safeguards in the plan were wholly inadequate. This court decision essentially quashed the agency's plans, and today, oil and gas drilling in Otero Mesa is suspended indefinitely.

After working for nearly ten years to protect this wild and beautiful grassland from the oil and gas industry, we now stand in a position to take steps proactively for the good of this area's wilderness, wildlife, and water resources.

Otero Mesa National Monument

Back in February of 2010, a draft memo was leaked from the Department of Interior that listed possible new national monuments that might be designated across the country. Immediately following this leak, there were some members of Congress and other elected officials from western states who cried foul and shouted that this was a "federal land grab!" More on that in a minute.

The memo, described by the Interior Department as a "brainstorm," stated that "many nationally significant landscapes are worthy of inclusion in the [National Landscape Conservation System]," and that "the areas listed may be good candidates for National Monument designation under the Antiquities Act; however, further evaluations should be completed prior to any final decision, including an assessment of public and Congressional support."



Making the short list of potential new monuments was our very own Otero Mesa.

The memo went on to say that "Otero Mesa is one of the last remaining vestiges of grasslands—America's most endangered ecosystem," and that "these vast desert grasslands of Otero Mesa, once found throughout the region, have disappeared or been reduced to small patches unable to support native wildlife."

The fact that Otero Mesa is actually being considered for national monument designation is nothing short of tremendous news. Tens of thousands of New Mexicans have written letters to elected leaders, attended public hearings, donated time, money, and energy to the campaign, visited the famed mesa, and poured their courage and resolve into the effort to safeguard this land. Hundreds of elected officials, from all sides of the aisle, have supported efforts to save Otero Mesa, and a handful of real champions in state and federal government have made a stand when it was necessary to do so.

With the launching of President Obama's America's Great Outdoors Initiative, which seeks to reconnect the public to the outdoors and find ways of protecting ecologically significant landscapes, we are potentially witnessing a new course in American conservation – one in which we hope it will be recognized that some places should clearly be left alone and preserved for their inherent character.

In March, Governor Bill Richardson (D-NM) wrote a letter to the Department of Interior stating that he strongly supports actions the department is taking toward establishing national monuments, "including Otero Mesa in southern New Mexico." The governor also wrote that he "has been and [will] remain committed to obtaining long-term protection for Otero Mesa."

Of all the elected officials from western states who reacted to the leaked memo, New Mexico's governor was the only one to react so positively. Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions lurking in the public's mind about what a national monument would look like in

(Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, Proclamation No. 7317)

Furthermore, when it comes to grazing in national monuments, this practice is generally allowed to continue. It is important to understand that monument designations are not a one-size-fits-all approach. The establishment of most national monuments on BLM lands has involved numerous public meetings, as well as extended discussions with local governments and other interested parties, plus the Resource Advisory Councils that include representation from economic development and conservation interests, as well as local government. An example of monument language that relates specifically to grazing reads as follows:

"Laws, regulations, and policies followed by the Bureau of Land Management in issuing and administering grazing permits or leases on all lands under its jurisdiction shall continue to apply with regard to the lands in the monument." (Carrizo Plain National Monument, Proclamation No. 7393)

Hunting and fishing are also permitted, and state responsibility for management is often specifically highlighted, as in the following proclamation language:

"Nothing in this proclamation shall be deemed to enlarge or diminish the jurisdiction of the State of Arizona with respect to fish and wildlife management." (Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Proclamation No. 7374)

But don't just take my word for it; look it up for yourself by Googling any monument proclamation.

What Are the Benefits of a National Monument?

First and foremost, an Otero Mesa

National Monument would ensure the long-term protection of this magnificent landscape and all its resources. The prospect of oil and gas drilling or mining would be off the table for good.

The sheer fact of this area having been recognized as a monument and given that title would elevate its status not only nationally, but around the world, as a place to visit and recreate in. That would translate directly into real dollars for local communities. New businesses in the town of Alamogordo could thrive on an influx of tourism, bringing in income from horseback riding trips, birding, hunting, bed and breakfasts, plus much more. Outdoor tourism in New Mexico already contributes \$3.8 billion dollars to the state economy annually. There's certainly no reason why the Land of Enchantment could not promote our special places more actively, and Alamogordo could benefit directly by being the gateway community for America's largest and wildest grassland.

While tourism sectors—lodging, restaurants, guide services, etc.—would benefit, economists and researchers note that special places like Otero Mesa also attract a diverse spectrum of revenue flows generated by second-home owners, retirees, and "foot-loose entrepreneurs" who have the financial wherewithal and the freedom to live where they desire and telecommute.

In addition, local communities that protect wildlands reap measurable benefits in terms of employment and personal income. For instance, a recent report by the Sonoran Institute found that:

Protected lands have the greatest influence on economic growth in rural isolated counties that lack easy access to larger markets. From 1970 to 2000, real per capita income in isolated rural counties with protected land grew more than 60 percent faster than isolated

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counties without any protected lands.

Ultimately, though, the overarching benefit of a national monument in Otero Mesa would be that New Mexicans helped protect the land for the land's sake, and that would be something we could all be proud of.

How Is a National Monument Different from Other Forms of Protection?

An Otero Mesa National Monument would be managed by the Bureau of Land Management, and BLM monuments are not like national parks. There would be no use fees and generally, no major development on the designated lands. Like most other units of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System, monuments don't have facilities built in them; rather, they are designed to remain rugged and offer a primitive experience. Visitor centers are often built in the communities closest to the monument, and visitors are directed to these nearby "gateway communities."

Whereas Wilderness designation would prohibit any form of mechanized travel, monuments allow motorized vehicles, though access is generally restricted to designated roads. Traditional uses, such as hiking, hunting, camping, backpacking, grazing, etc. are still allowed.

What's more, monument proclamations can address specific issues in a variety of ways. Each proclamation creating a national monument

is different, addressing specific issues relating to the individual place.

The Oil and Gas Resources of Otero Mesa

Even though oil and gas leasing and drilling has been suspended in Otero Mesa, it is important for us to understand that this resource in the region is fairly insignificant.

The BLM has concluded that Otero Mesa and the surrounding area do not have the potential to yield significant oil and gas. The industry's purported interest in developing the area is belied by these facts. The potential yield from development of Otero Mesa is minuscule in comparison to the substantial amounts of oil and gas

produced in the nearby Permian Basin.

At one point, New Mexico BLM Director Linda Rundell stated, "I think there's a huge question mark about whether there's ever going to be an economically viable resource that anyone will want to produce.... It's really pretty small potatoes."

When you analyze New Mexico's gas consumption in 2007 versus total state gas production, and compare that with what the BLM thinks could be produced from Otero Mesa, the findings are really quite shocking. The BLM's figure comes from the Reasonable Foreseeable Development (RFD) scenario, published in their Record of Decision, and the state gas figures can be found in reports issued by the New Mexico Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department.

The BLM's RFD estimates that if all wells were drilled and all hit commercially viable amounts of gas, Otero Mesa would produce fifty-four billion cubic feet of natural gas over the course of twenty years.

In 2007 alone, however, New Mexico consumed 223 billion cubic feet of natural gas. Over the course of twenty years, assuming consumption levels remained static, New Mexico's consumption of natural gas would exceed 4,500 billion cubic feet.

Put simply, over the next twenty years, the state of New Mexico would consume eighty-two times more natural gas than would ever be produced from Otero Mesa.

Or, in plain English: Otero Mesa would produce just 1.2 percent of New Mexico's annual gas consumption.

Making Conservation History

It is clear that, as this process moves forward, the citizens of New Mexico will have yet another chance to let the Department of Interior and our congressional delegation know that we support protecting Otero Mesa's wilderness, water, and wildlife. We have a unique opportunity to be a part of conservation history by permanently preserving this wild and beautiful place, and that is something of which very few people can say they were ever a part.

New Mexicans value the history and beauty of our state's natural heritage, and we are committed to protecting it. Protection of the rare and fragile Chihuahuan Desert and the greater landscape and ecosystems of the Otero Mesa area is an important commitment on the part of the people of New Mexico and the entire country. Resolutions calling for the protection of Otero Mesa have been passed by a growing number of local governments, including the City of Las Cruces, the Doña Ana County Commission, the Sierra County Commission, the City of El Paso, the El Paso County Commission, and the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, among many others. These government actions reflect the diverse group of citizens across the state and the nation who support permanent protection of Otero Mesa.

By making Otero Mesa America's next great national monument, we will ensure that the untamed spirit of this wonderful place stays intact and that future generations will have the opportunity to set foot in one of the wildest places left in the United States.

For when you step into Otero Mesa and just listen, you can all but hear the earth beating beneath your feet; the swell of a drum under you building to a crescendo; and the heart of wildness flowing through you.

