

February 28, 2007

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Energy and Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Bingaman:

We write to urge you to secure protection for Otero Mesa in southeastern New Mexico, while USGS and Sandia Labs conduct a study of the water resources of the Salt Basin and the risks to that water from activities such as oil and gas development.

Otero Mesa 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 is the best remaining Chihuahuan grassland in New Mexico and wonderful, wild area. Also, as Governor Richardson pointed out in his State of the State address, Otero Mesa harbors potentially hundreds of millions of gallons of water, enough to provide a sustainable fresh water supply for communities in southern New Mexico

In October 2006, Judge Bruce Black issued a ruling in the lawsuits brought by the Governor of New Mexico and conservation and sportsmen's organizations. While recognizing the unique values of Otero Mesa and the inadequacies of BLM's existing NEPA analysis, the judge allowed the BLM to proceed with new leasing on Otero Mesa if it completes additional site specific environmental analysis. BLM is currently developing its plans for leasing on Otero Mesa and, from all indications, is not heeding the court's admonition for thorough consideration of the likely damage to these fragile grasslands.

A new Open File Report produced by USGS and Sandia National Laboratories entitled ***Knowledge and Understanding of the Hydrogeology of the Salt Basin in South-Central New Mexico and Future Study Needs***, confirms that there is significant water in the Salt Basin and that is at potential risk of contamination. The report recommends a number of "next steps" to "***minimize negative impacts associated with, while maximizing positive benefits from, future ground-water withdrawal***"

Among the recommendations of the Open File Report is that U.S. Geological Survey, Sandia National Laboratories and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission conduct a comprehensive study of the Salt Basin aquifers. It is anticipated that this study will take up to 3 years.

Leasing and development of Otero Mesa threaten the many values of this area, including the water resource now being studied in the basin. We urge you to seek a 3-year moratorium on oil and gas leasing and development for Otero Mesa while the comprehensive water study is being conducted.

Sincerely,

Lt. Governor Diana Denish
Secretary of Energy & Minerals, Joanna Prukop

State Representatives:

Edward Sandoval, District 17
Andrew Nunez, District 37
Gail Chasey, District 18
Nate Cote, District 53
Jeff Steinbron, District 37
Al Park, District 26
James Roger Madalena, District 65
Danice Picraux, District 25
Antonio Maestas, District 16
Mimi Stewart, District 21
Rick Miera, District 11
Nick L. Salazar, District 40
Peter Wirth, District 47

State Senators:

Senator Mary Jane Garcia, District 36
Senator Cisco McSorely, District 16
Senator Linda Lopez, District 11
Senator Jerry Ortiz y Pino, District 12
Senator Dede Feldman, District 13

County Officials:

Chair, Dona Ana County Commissioner Karen G. Perez, District 3
Dona Ana County Commissioner Bill McCamley, District 5
Dona Ana County Commissioner Oscar Vásquez Butler, District 1

City Officials:

Mayor Martin Chavez, Albuquerque
Mayor Michael Cadena, Village of Mesilla
City Councilor Martin Heinrich, Albuquerque
City Councilor Michael Cadigan, Albuquerque
City Councilor Isaac Benton, Albuquerque
City Councilor José V. Frieze, Las Cruces
City Councilor Gil Jones, Las Cruces
City Councilor Ken Miyagishima, Las Cruces

OTHERS:

Sandy Jones, Member of NM Public Regulation Commission, District 5
Ben Luce, Director, NM Coalition for Clean Affordable Energy