



*Protecting Doña Ana County's Natural Heritage*

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## **Diverse coalition praises effort to preserve special lands in the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument**

***Legislation introduced by Sens. Udall and Heinrich would protect wilderness within the national monument***

**Las Cruces, New Mexico (June 10, 2016)** – Sportsmen, Native Americans, business leaders, veterans, civic groups, current and former local elected officials, archaeologists, historians, and conservation organizations applauded the re-introduction of the “[Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Conservation Act](#)” ([S. 3049](#)) today. A broad coalition successfully worked to create the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument, and has been advocating for wilderness protection of this area for nearly a decade.

The bill, introduced by New Mexico Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, would designate eight wilderness areas within the national monument. The proposed wilderness would give a higher level of protection to special lands within the monument. Many of the proposed wilderness areas enjoy temporary wilderness status as Wilderness Study Areas (WSA), but only Congress can designate an official wilderness area through legislation.

Legislation to safeguard the wilderness in Doña Ana County was first introduced by former Senator Jeff Bingaman in 2009 in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, and then again by Senators Udall and Heinrich in the 112<sup>th</sup> and 113<sup>th</sup> Congresses. In 2014, President Obama established the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument.

Hunting, livestock grazing, hiking, camping, horseback riding, firefighting, law enforcement activities, and border security would continue in the wilderness areas. The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks contains approximately 306 bird species and 78 mammal species including golden eagles, mule deer, javelina, cougar, ring-tail cat, and quail. The proposed wilderness will strengthen the wildlife habitat for these species as well as protect the watersheds that they depend on.

*“I want to thank Senators Udall and Heinrich for safeguarding our important hunting areas like the Sierra de Las Uvas, West Potrillos, and Robledo Mountains,” said **John Cornell, President of***

**the Doña Ana County Associated Sportsmen.** *“Backcountry hunting is a time-honored tradition, and it is becoming increasingly rare in the United States. I want to be able to pass this heritage down to my children and grandchildren, and protection of our pristine wilderness areas will forever protect this.”*

A [recent poll](#) commissioned by the Las Cruces Green Chamber of Commerce showed 78% of citizens in Doña Ana County support the protection of wilderness within the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument.

*“Designating the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument was an economic win for Las Cruces and Doña Ana County,” said **David Crider, owner of Southwest Expeditions.** “We are quickly becoming an outdoor recreation destination and a place people want to live thanks to our protected public lands. Preserving our wilderness is another important step in securing our quality of life and economic future.”*

Law enforcement and Border Patrol has been unaffected in the national monument. In fact, [U.S. Customs Border Protection \(CBP\)](#) wrote that S. 3049 would "significantly enhance the flexibility of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to operate in this border area."

*“Safeguarding wilderness within the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument would protect what makes America great,” said **former State Representative and veterans advocate Nate Cote.** “Our great outdoors, like the lands in Doña Ana County, symbolize what we fought to protect for future generations to enjoy.”*

The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Conservation Act would designate eight wilderness areas within the national monument totaling 241,067 acres. Eighty percent of the proposed wilderness is already managed as such, including Doña Ana County’s eight wilderness study areas (WSA’s). Notably, S. 3049 removes 32,850 acres from WSA protection in the West Potrillo Mountains to expand the border buffer.

**Rafael Gomez, Tribal Councilman from the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo added** *“Protecting wilderness within the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks will preserve rich tribal and Hispano heritage that is vital to our community across the country. The wilderness areas keep us connected to our families, traditions and the land itself.”*

The wilderness areas protected would be:

- **Aden Lava Flow Wilderness:** This area offers one of the best opportunities in the continental United States to view lava flows and the many unique shapes and structures created by them.
- **Broad Canyon Wilderness:** This area is home to countless archeological sites and an extensive record of previous Indigenous culture habitation within the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks region.
- **Cinder Cone Wilderness:** Features an extremely high concentration of undisturbed cinder cone mountains known for their remoteness and unique wildlife habitat.
- **Organ Mountains Wilderness:** The rugged terrain makes this one of the steepest mountain ranges in the western United States. These mountains are the picturesque backdrop to Las Cruces, and were mentioned in the earliest Spanish journals.

- **Potrillo Mountains Wilderness:** The Potrillo Mountains Wilderness contains eight different habitat sites, all substantially intact, across its terrain. The trans-pecos shrub savanna, mesquite-acacia savanna, and grama-tobosa shrub steppe vegetation types support some of southern New Mexico's healthiest wildlife populations. There are four known pueblo sites in the West Potrillo Mountains and Mount Riley WSA. One site is a Classic Mimbres pueblo, and there are several El Paso phase structures.
- **Robledo Mountains Wilderness:** Named after Spanish colonist Pedro Robledo, these mountains sheltered both Billy the Kid and Geronimo in the late-19th century and include the Paleozoic Trackways National Monument.
- **Sierra de las Uvas Wilderness:** This diverse mountain range is a hunting hot spot with wildlife habitat home to three different quail species, desert mule deer, and pronghorn antelope. Cultural riches also abound.
- **Whitethorn Wilderness:** This area is named for the prevalent white-thorn acacia, a key year-round food source for quail and a summer food source for desert mule deer. Weathered lava houses small and large wildlife, and views stretch hundreds of miles.

To learn more about community driven effort to protect the wilderness within the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks as a national monument, visit [OrganMountains.org](https://www.organmountains.org).

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