

August 2, 2023

The Honorable Debra Haaland, Secretary
U.S. Department of Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20242

The Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Brenda Mallory, Chairperson
Council on Environmental Quality
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Randy Moore, Chief
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Tracy Stone-Manning, Director
U.S. Bureau of Land Management
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Re: Proposed Administrative Mineral Withdrawal for the Headwaters of the Pecos River

Dear Secretary Haaland, Secretary Vilsack, Chair Mallory, Chief Moore, and Director Stone-Manning:

On behalf of the undersigned stakeholders, representing tribal leaders, state and local elected officials, farmers and parciantes, community organizations, small businesses, and conservation and recreation groups, we write to formally request that you take immediate steps to initiate an administrative mineral withdrawal for the headwaters of New Mexico's Pecos River.

Without prompt agency action, we are concerned that a withdrawal cannot be finalized during the first term of the Biden administration, putting the future of this watershed, cultural and natural resources, downstream communities, and sites such as Pecos National Historical Park at great risk.

It is unlikely you will encounter a mineral withdrawal request with more local support than the Pecos. Recently, San Miguel County, Santa Fe County, and the Village of Pecos all unanimously passed resolutions in support of a 20-year administrative mineral withdrawal for portions of the watershed. Members of New Mexico's state legislature whose districts include portions of the watershed included in the proposed withdrawal have publicly called for the mineral withdrawal to move forward. In May of 2023, Governor Lujan Grisham sent a letter to Secretary Haaland and Chief Moore urging you to begin the process of administratively withdrawing lands specified in the Pecos Watershed Protection Act from mineral exploration to protect the region's cultural, ecological, and recreational resources for the people of New Mexico. All five members of New Mexico's Congressional delegation have requested that the Forest Service, in conjunction with the Bureau of Land Management, protect the upper watershed through a mineral withdrawal.

Such consensus between local, state, congressional, and tribal leaders regarding the importance of administratively protecting the headwaters of the Pecos River through a mineral withdrawal warrants action. We ask that you begin the process to withdraw lands specified in the Pecos Watershed Protection Act from mineral entry and associated activities, thereby protecting the clean water and cultural values of this special place and providing time for New Mexico's congressional delegation to secure more permanent protections.

The risks to the headwaters of the Pecos River from mineral exploration and development are both real and urgent. For context, in 2019 Comexico LLC, a Colorado-based subsidiary of Australian mining company New World Resources Ltd, acquired 20 mining claims in the Jones Hill area near Tererro, New Mexico. Comexico then applied for a state permit to conduct exploratory drilling for gold, copper, zinc, lead, and silver. This initial exploratory drilling could adversely impact more than 400 acres and five tributaries of the Pecos River. Alarmingly, Comexico has gained ownership of over 236 mining claims throughout the Pecos headwaters. The area now claimed by Comexico covers 4,300 acres and, if developed, would impact the entire Pecos watershed and possibly the Santa Fe municipal watershed.

Contamination from past mining in the region and impacts on water quality have long been concerns for Pecos Valley residents. In the early 1990s, toxic waste from past mining activities near Tererro entered the river, contaminating community water

supplies, causing a massive fish kill, and driving away tourists, resulting in an economic downturn. New Mexico taxpayers footed the bill for millions in reclamation and cleanup costs.

Perhaps most concerning, new mining operations would occur in a geologic formation associated with acid mine drainage, posing a serious threat to water quality and aquatic life. While hardrock mining has played an important role in our country's economic prosperity, today water quality in thousands of stream miles is impaired by heavy metals or acidity and abandoned mines are a major source of these impairments.

Thank you for considering and quickly addressing our request. We hope to have the honor of hosting you and your staff in New Mexico and are confident that with your support we can move quickly to secure protections for this special watershed cherished by New Mexicans from all corners of the state. Please do not hesitate to contact us for additional information.

We look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,

American Rivers
Rachel Ellis, Southwest River Protection
Program

Amigos Bravos
Joseph Zupan, Executive Director

Audubon Southwest
Judy Calman, Director of Policy

Conservation Voters New Mexico
Greg Peters, Conservation Director

Defenders of Wildlife
Bryan Bird, Southwest Program Director

Earth Keepers 360
Reverend Andrew Black, Founder

Flowerhill Institute
Joseph B. Toledo, Cultural Advisor

Forest Trust
Henry H. Carey, President

Gila Resources Information Project
Allyson Siwik, Executive Director

HECHO (Hispanics Enjoying Camping,
Hunting, and the Outdoors)
Max O. Trujillo, Senior Field
Coordinator

Hummingbird Cabin on the Pecos
Joseph Giambalvo & Barbara Miller

Las Vegas Peace & Justice Center
Pat Leahan, Co-Director

Molino de la Isla Organics
Ralph A Vigil, Owner

National Parks Conservation
Association
Emily Wolf, New Mexico Senior
Program Coordinator

New Mexico Acequia Association
Paula Garcia, Executive Director

New Mexico Acequia Commission
Ralph A Vigil, Chair

New Mexico Climate Justice
Anni Hanna, Director

New Mexico Environmental Law Center
Dr. Virginia Necochea, Executive
Director

New Mexico Wilderness Alliance
Sally Paez, Staff Attorney
Carol Johnson, Board Member

N.M. State Representative Ambrose
Castellano, District 70

N.M. State Representative Joseph
Sanchez, District 40

N.M. State Senator Elizabeth "Liz"
Stefanics, District 39

N.M. State Senator Peter Wirth, Senate
Majority Leader, District 25

New Mexico Wildlife Federation
Jesse Deubel, Executive Director

Pecos NM Business Association
Wendy Wilkerson, Artist

Pecos River Cabins
Kimberly Allen, Owner

Pecos River Open Spaces, Inc.
Christopher Thomson, President
Liza Bambenek, Susan Livermore, &
Catherine A Louisell

Pecos Self Storage
Brian Hamos, Owner

River Source, Inc.
Rich Schrader, Director

San Miguel County Commissioner
Janice Varela

San Miguel County Planning & Zoning
Amanda Salas, Director

Santa Fe County Commissioner Anna
Hansen

Santa Fe Fat Tire Society
Kyle Klain, President

Santa Fe Fly Fishing Schools
David Lemke, Owner

Santa Fe Watershed Association
Morika Vorenberg Hensley, Executive
Director

Sierra Club
Teresa Seamster, Mining/Rio Grande
Chapter

Stephen Nelson
Local Resident, Dalton Canyon

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation
Partnership
Elle Benson, Southwestern Water
Program Coordinator

The Wilderness Society
Michael Casaus, New Mexico State
Director

Trout Unlimited
Dan Roper, New Mexico State Policy
Lead

Upper Pecos Watershed Association
Lela McFerrin, Vice President

Western Environmental Law Center
Tannis Fox, Senior Attorney

Western Resource Advocates
Jeremy Vesbach, Western Lands
Program Director

WildEarth Guardians
Madeleine Carey, Southwest
Conservation Manager

Wildlands Network
Michael Dax, Western Program Director

Cc:

Senator Martin Heinrich

Senator Ben Ray Luján

Representative Teresa Leger Fernández

Representative Melanie Stansbury

Representative Gabe Vasquez

Chair Mark Mitchell, All Pueblo Council of Governors

Chair J. Michael Chavarria, Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council

Encl:

San Miguel County Resolution No. 05-09-23-Commission

Santa Fe County Resolution No. 2023-055

Village of Pecos, N.M. Resolution No. 2023-006

Letter from Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham (May 8, 2023)

Letter from N.M. Congressional Delegation (June 5, 2023)

Santa Fe New Mexican Editorial (May 5, 2023)

Santa Fe New Mexican Commentary (June 24, 2023)

Santa Fe New Mexican Letters to the Editor (July 20 & 28, 2023)