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OP-ED: Obama should declare Greater Canyonlands monument

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By Jim Baca

Recently President Obama designated the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks in New Mexico as our nation's newest national monument. The designation will preserve irreplaceable archaeological, prehistoric, and cultural sites, while safeguarding outdoor recreation opportunities that are so important for New Mexico. It is the second monument that President Obama has designated in New Mexico, following the creation of Rio Grande del Norte National Monument last year. There is strong community support for permanently protecting both of these special places as national monuments, and I have to say that as a former mayor of Albuquerque I'm pleased to see New Mexico's special places get this well-deserved recognition.

Though President Obama has already permanently protected a number of special places, ranging from the historic sites of Fort Monroe, Virginia and Chimney Rock, Colorado to Point Arena-Stornetta Public Lands in California, the job of protecting our country's outdoor heritage is far from finished. We are thrilled the President has promised more designations in the future. Across the country there is a plethora of breathtakingly beautiful, ecologically important, or culturally significant places that are still in need of protection. Among them is Utah's Greater Canyonlands.

With Canyonlands National Park at its heart, the Greater Canyonlands area in Southern Utah is one of the last untouched Western frontiers, yet it remains easily accessible. The lofty plateaus and amazing red rock formations provide an outdoor experience unlike any other, and offer opportunities for solitude in an increasingly connected world.

It is also one of the Colorado Plateau's most critical watersheds. Through it the Green, Dirty Devil, and San Rafael Rivers wind south to meet the Colorado, providing drinking water for 30 million people across the Southwest. Along the way these rivers nourish some 960 species of desert flora and a rich array of wildlife, from black bears in the Abajo Mountains, to mountain lions and desert bighorn sheep at Hatch Point, to peregrine falcons in Labyrinth Canyon. Seven endangered or threatened species find refuge there.

The Greater Canyonlands was home to dinosaurs, and more than 12,000 years of human history, from Ice Age hunting camps and ancestral Puebloan sites, to a hideout for Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid. And whether it's to experience that history or to take advantage of one of the many recreation opportunities — climbing, hiking, camping, rafting — the area draws people from near and far.

Each year outdoor recreation in Utah generates \$12 billion in spending, supporting more than 122,000 jobs, according to the Outdoor Industry Association. While many come to enjoy recreation opportunities for just a short time, research shows that those opportunities are also

important to the quality of life for a majority of Utah residents. At least 82 percent of Utahns spend time recreating outdoors each year. Permanently protecting Greater Canyonlands will help secure those opportunities and support the outdoor economy, as demonstrated by Utah's existing protected public lands.

Recent legislative efforts in D.C. to undermine the president's ability to protect special places are out of step with public opinion. The national response to these types of efforts demonstrates that there is overwhelming support for managing our country's public lands and waters in a way that will sustain local economies, enhance quality of life for our children and protect our rich conservation legacy.

I applaud President Obama for following in the footsteps of past presidents and using his authority to protect our country's special places. I hope that as he continues that proud tradition of safeguarding our outdoor heritage, he looks to Utah and the Greater Canyonlands. There is strong support for saving this slice of wild; it's an important part of the American story and it deserves to be recognized as such.

Jim Baca has served as New Mexico Natural Resource Trustee, Mayor of Albuquerque, Director of the BLM, and New Mexico Commissioner of Public Lands.

For more information about the letter, go to: www.greatercanyonlands.org/news/.

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