

Coalition calls on Congress to protect Valle Vidal

Enviros: Don't 'Disneyfy' the Valle

By Bobby Magill The Taos News

Local environmentalists are calling on New Mexico's congressional delegation to permanently protect the Valle Vidal.

That was the Coalition for the Valle Vidal's plea Monday (June 20) to Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.), Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) and Rep. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) during an interview on KTAO-FM 101.9 after the Forest Service released its proposed forest plan amendment for the Valle last week.

A 90-day comment period about the amendment ends Sept. 15, and coalition members hope the community will respond quickly.

The coalition's Jim O'Donnell said after the radio interview that he's concerned that if the Forest Service decides to close the Valle Vidal to potential coalbed methane development, the Bush administration will change the Valle Vidal amendment documents and the analysis of the effects of gas leasing on the area in favor of drilling.

The Valle Vidal amendment documents "are written in such a way that we are unsure where the process will take us," O'Donnell said. "It gives Rep. Udall and Sen. Bingaman further ammunition to get on the ball and introduce a bill into Congress."

Domenici's office did not return phone calls seeking comment before press time, however, Udall Press Secretary Glen Loveland said in an e-mail Monday that Udall's support for protecting the Valle Vidal is "unequivocal."

"It's clear that a majority of New Mexicans support preserving this magnificent area," Loveland wrote. "Representative Udall is in the process of reviewing what the legislative options are. Our goal would be for a united effort in the House and Senate."

O'Donnell said he believes it will be difficult to win the coalition's fight for the Valle Vidal through the Forest Service's public comment process.

"We want permanent protection, and only Congress can give permanent protection."

Bingaman spokeswoman Maria Najera said Bingaman is "very much in favor" of protecting the Valle Vidal, and once he finishes dealing with the energy bill now being deliberated in Congress, "then we will move on to other issues, and this (the Valle Vidal) will be one of them."

Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, a lawyer at the Western Environmental Law Center in Taos, said on KTAO that what's troubling is that the Forest Service is using a two-step process to make a decision about drilling on the Valle Vidal: The agency is writing the forest plan amendment followed by a leasing analysis.

If it's clear the public is interested in preventing methane development in the Valle, "why not just say 'No' at the forest plan stage?" Schlenker-Goodrich said.

O'Donnell also railed against the proposed botanical area designation for Little Costilla Peak, which calls for designated campsites and interpretive trails and services.

“My fear is that it’s a Trojan horse for the ‘ Disneyfication’ of the Valle Vidal — to turn it into an industrial recreation area,” he said. “While we definitely want people out on the land, (a trail- and sign-laden Little Costilla) subtracts from the outdoor experience.”

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