

Briefing Presented to the New Mexico Legislative Land Grant Committee

July 5, 2016

Mr. Chair, and members of the Committee, my name is Bonifacio I. Vasquez, president of the Board of Trustees of the Santa Barbara Land Grant. I wish to extend a warm welcome to all of you on behalf of the heirs of the Santa Barbara and Santo Tomás Apóstol Del Rio de las Trampas Land Grant . We are honored to host the New Mexico Legislature's Land Grant Committee. Thank you for giving us this opportunity.

Folks, whatever we are doing at federal, state, and local government levels for Peñasco and the 20 surrounding communities, is not working. I remember these communities thriving at modest economic levels when our local resources were used to employ people. The federal government had a post office in every community. The Penasco Ranger Station had its own "Hot Shot" fire fighting crew, provided summer youth employment to maintain trails in the forest and camp grounds, and a *look-out* manned twenty-four hours. At the State level, we had the State Highway Department, and our public schools. We had a parochial school run by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, and there were several other church denominations in our valley that provided activities for our youth. Private business included several stores, gas stations, liquor establishments and dance halls, a movie theater, and several saw mills. And who can forget the "Burger Bowl" operated by Mrs. Connie Martinez. We had well maintained Acequias and a Forest that was maintained and provided sustainment resources and employment. There was hunting, fishing, trails, and camping areas.

In recent years, we have seen a movement by environmental groups to move people off the land. Now, we have the Forest Service doing the same thing by adopting policies that cut access to resources used and needed by our communities. The number one resource in Northern New Mexico is the Forest. If we kill the economic potential of an area by cutting access to the resources, we kill the communities; we kill the culture, and we kill the traditions of people who are tied to the land.

In the last twenty-five (25) years the size of nearly every Land Grant in New Mexico has been reduced by illegal shenanigans, land squatters both private and commercial, and the U.S. Forest Service. Sadly, the Santa Barbara and Santo Tomás are no exception. Reduction is also the case in the number of grazing permits in our land which has caused the decline of a once thriving cattle industry to barely sustainable levels. We now have a total decline of every important economy process of a community. The federal government has closed several of its post offices, there is no Hot Shot fire fighting crew, and there is no summer youth programs. Our look-out is just an abandoned structure. The US Forest Service is now in the process of revising the Carson Forest Plan and attempting to shut us out of our own Land Grant Land by declaring it Wilderness. The Camino Real Ranger District provided only 225 wood permits in 2015 (***The Taos News- What is Missing by Hart Alex***) knowing that these communities are highly dependent on fire wood for heating and cooking, since we have no natural gas in this area. The State Highway Department yard in Penasco seems fairly empty and inactive most of the time. I know of at least two public roads that are no longer open. We have a public school that in 1971 graduated seventy-three

(73) students; last year we had a class of twenty-four (24) graduates. The Archdiocese closed the private school and now provides limited services to our churches. There is not a single saw mill in the area. We have two stores, one liquor establishment, and three gas stations. The Office of Policy Analysis at Arrowhead Center, dated July 2015, the per capita personal income in Taos County in 2013 was \$32,195 and ranked 21 in the state. The total employment in Taos County decreased 8.78 percent between 2007 and 2013 while the state and nation saw a decrease in employment of 2.30 percent. Yes, folks if we do not do something we will lose our history, our land and our culture. All this is going on right in front of our eyes and for the most part we seem to be standing and waiting for a train crash. And the train is coming in the form of a proposed wilderness expansion over our Land Grants.

The first time the communities around Penasco became aware of this new Wilderness Expansion was in October 6, 2015 during a Taos County Board of Commissioners meeting. A Coalition headed by Ms. Carol Johnson with the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and Mr. Garrett VeneKlasen with the New Mexico Wildlife Federation introduced Resolution 2015-34. This resolution was introduced without public meetings or hearings. After some discussion, the Board decided to table the Resolution and recommended meetings between interested parties. In November we attended a meeting here at the Community Center where the Wilderness Alliance attempted to sell us their idea of expanding the Pecos Wilderness over the Santa Barbara and Las Trampas Land Grants. This meeting was contentious, and that's putting it mildly. The Protect the Pecos Coalition was hoping to sell their idea of a forest with ideal potential for recreation. I don't think they were prepared for the anger, frustration, accusations of land grabbing, encroachment, lack of access to fuel wood, road closures in order to fit the wilderness criteria, forest overgrowth, forest health, fire danger and violations of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. There was anger at Forest Service about the management of resources, anger over the mismanagement policies of the Forest Service, accusations of racial discrimination, and total and complete rejection of wilderness expansion. This was a meeting that unleashed pent up anger and frustration over the loss of land and traditional use of resources and the continued erosion of our heritage and our culture. What we heard was anger and fear from an agrarian, land-based, land grant community who have survived here for centuries living in harmony with the land and to this day, still using the abundant resources of the land as we have been taught for generations. These land grant communities have used the forest for resources to build their homes, heat their homes and cooks their meals, graze their livestock, irrigate their crops, hunt, etc. From the floor we heard other issues involving the management and lack of management of water and land resources, encroachment of grassland, road closures that prevent people from accessing fuel wood. Further restrictions on grazing, forest overgrowth, forest health, and real fear that wilderness designation would serve to lock our people out. In short order there were over three hundred signatures on a petition against Wilderness Expansion and we were able to have Resolution 2015-34 tabled to the third quarter of 2016. This situation has given us the opportunity to organize. We held a bona fide election to elect a Board of Trustees for both land grants. We have developed member approved by-laws and have requested sub-division status from the State. Also, during November and December timeframe we attended meetings with the Forest Service in Tierra Amarilla and Taos and discovered the U.S. Forest Service was working on revising of the Carson Forest Plan. What a coincidence they were also working on Wilderness evaluation. Since October 2015 we have attended and held several meetings with both the Coalitions and Forest Service. We have reached

the conclusion that we have the common goal of conserving our lands but we have different views and reasons on how to accomplish this goal. We believe in the management of the land resources which is mandated by the National Forest Management Act of 1974 and they believe in keeping us out of our lands which is the essence of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Our Acequias are the blood system of our communities. Both land grants share water from the Santa Barbara River. Currently there are several improvement projects under way but the two major ones are the piping of Llano, Chamisal, and Ojito Acequias. These projects combined amount to nearly five (5) million dollars in which seventy-five (75%) percent is federally funded. A fact sheet is provided in your packet regarding the situation of the Llano piping. The Chamisal and Ojito piping project is under design and plans to go into contraction are set for September 2016.

The Taos County Comprehensive Plan Vision Statement is:

“Taos County is a diverse and traditional community, with strong land and water connections and a rich cultural heritage, that seeks to be sustainable through preserving our historical roots, creating vibrant neighborhoods, encouraging viable locally –based economic development, and protecting our watersheds and natural resources. Our neighborhoods are places where multi generations of families can live, work and be involved in the Taos County community. We treasure our rural and agricultural traditions rich with diverse and multi-cultural heritages. We will preserve these cultures and historical religious traditions as we strive to improve our quality of life in the future.” Therefore we recommend the following actions:

Immediate Actions

Have the State Attorney General’s Office investigate how the Wilderness Expansion is threatening or invading the legal rights of the Santa Barbara and Santo Tomás del Rio de las Trampas Land Grants. Have the AG file an injunction on the wilderness expansion.

Have the States Legal Aid Department review, research and provide us recommendation(s) on how to proceed with the problem of Land squatters. We will provide our historical records.

Appropriate the States portion of funding for the two piping acequia projects and help us secure funding for the 7.5% of parcientes (acequia member) share.

Short term Actions

Get the boot of this progressive giant off our throat and let us re-start the timber industry. Allow free market principles and put people back to work on treatment of our forest. This would help our economy, improve the health of our forest, and secure our water shed.

Get our lands back from the Federal Government.

Introduce and pass legislation that will clearly spell out how the State will handle the Land Grant property.

Demand the US Forest Service adhere to the provisions of the Wilderness Act 1964, Para. Suitability. (C)advise the Governor of the State.....to submit their views on the proposed action...

Long Term Actions

Continue working with organizations such as The Rio Grande Water Fund. This organization is working on wildfire and water source protection. They can help us treat our Forest. This treatment can provide employment, protect our water shed and improve the over-all condition of our environment.

Introduce and pass legislation on revenue sharing for Land Grants from the Federal and State levels.

SUBJECT TO YOUR QUESTIONS – THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.