

House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Thursday, April 24, 2008
HR 859: Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area Act

Written Testimony from Mr. Dennis Lopez

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Dennis J. Lopez and I am testifying in support of the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area (SDCNHA). I am a member of the steering committee for the proposed National Heritage Area. I am a sixth generation native of the San Luis Valley and my ancestors were one of the original forty families who were the grantees in 1843 of the Conejos Land Grant in Conejos County, Colorado. Raised in a bilingual, bicultural family, I have maintained the rich heritage of my Hispano ancestors, as well as being fluent in the American mainstream culture. I am a member of Adobe de Oro Concilio de Artes, a local arts council that promotes the documentation, preservation, and promotion of Indio-Hispano arts and traditions, and a past member of the Sociedad Proteccion Mutua de Trabajadores Unidos (S.P.M.D.T.U.), an Hispanic mutual protection society of united workers established in Conejos County in 1901. I received my post-secondary education at Adams State College in Alamosa County. My career of choice has been as an educator for the past thirty three years. For the first eighteen years I taught History of the Hispanic Southwest, Spanish and French; and for the past thirteen years I have been a high school administrator. I was an associate principal for five years and a principal for four years in the Alamosa School District and the past two years I was the principal at Sierra Grande School District in Costilla County. Between school districts I was an adjunct instructor and field placement program director at Adams State College's Teacher Education Department for three years. As an historian, linguist, and educator I have gained valuable insight into the evolving diverse aspects of our local and national heritage.

I wish to thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing. The bill to designate the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area is one of great importance to the three county region which lies within the great San Luis Valley of Colorado.

The San Luis Valley is located in the south central region of the State of Colorado and is surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo Range and the northern Culebre Range on the east rim and the San Juan Range, that makes up part of the Continental Divide of the majestic Rocky Mountains, on the west rim. At 122 miles long and 74 miles wide, the San Luis Valley is Colorado's largest mountain park and has been labeled "the highest, largest mountain desert in North America". The proposed designation area is comprised of Costilla, Conejos and Alamosa counties in addition to the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, Baca National Wildlife Refuge and the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge; all lying within the southeastern part of the San Luis Valley.

With 11,000 years of documented human habitation, the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area is a crossroads of the centuries. Here a unique blend of Native American, Hispano and Anglo settlement is reflected in the diversity of the people, arts, and traditions. The geographic isolation of the alpine valley and the people's enduring tie to the land have given rise to a rich cultural heritage and ensured its preservation. The area's fertile cultural landscape is complemented by remarkable natural resources, including the mighty Rio Grande, majestic

Rocky Mountain peaks, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, National Wildlife Refuges, and the high mountain desert; all of which lend the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area an unparalleled beauty that offers a sense of retreat and a powerful source of inspiration for visitors.

For a century and a half, the region has cultivated a rich heritage that is a living testament to the generations gone before us. Everyday life is endowed with traditions, both conscious and subconscious, that have been passed from father to son, mother to daughter, neighbor to neighbor. New neighbors learn traditional ways and over time, find themselves embracing these traditions either out of need or out of respect. This is a land that is essentially true to its roots.

The history of the proposed area is marked by the dynamic encounter of three major cultures during a time when the nation's boundaries and flags were in a state of constant change. First Nations, or Native Americans, Indio-Hispanos and Anglo-Europeans vied for the land. They held divergent views of the land and its resources. The Utes, who claim 11,000 years of ancestry and occupation, like other First Nations, had a unique and spiritual relationship with the land. They could never think in terms of owning it. That would have gone against all that they believed. The land was a friend, a provider, and a partner to all of nature. It fed and sheltered. It cared for the people and gave them everything they ever needed.

Hispanos claimed the territory for the motherland and God. Theirs was a communal self-sustaining system, which required the cooperation of everyone. Villages were born through the cooperation of extended families who built adobe structures which were connected and surrounded a town square called a plaza. Farming and ranching depended on the *acequia** system of irrigation which functions well only when everyone is a participant. Land ownership was for the good of the family, the community and the Church.

When Anglo-Europeans began to populate the land, they brought with them a system of deeds, surveys, titles, taxation and barbed wire to delineate and define. Mining, building railroads and big ranches were the goals. For the Anglo-Europeans, the land was not so much perceived as a place of sustenance; but, seen more as a source of resources to be used and extracted.

The U.S. military presence came in 1852, just one year after the first Hispano settlement in the region. Fort Massachusetts, built that year, proved to be inadequate, so the army replaced it with Fort Garland in 1858. Fort Garland remained an active fort for 25 years. Its mission was to protect settlers against hostile Indians. Hostilities were present among the three groups, but major battles never occurred.

The distinguishing elements that set the region apart from others are the multitude of natural resources and incredible recreational choices that integrate with the distinctive cultural landscape. Early settlers found precious water in abundance and fertile soil in which to raise crops and graze livestock. Vast forests provided wildlife, wood for lumber, plants for medicines and forage for livestock.

The designation area contains habitats and wildlife that are characteristic of the San Luis Valley, yet unique to Colorado and the West. A natural marvel, the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve lies to the north end of the designation area. The dunes, the tallest in North America, developed as a result of prevailing winds blowing across the valley.

Despite the title of "desert," the San Luis Valley boasts one of the West's most prized natural resources – WATER. Two separate aquifers underlie the valley and both contain large quantities of water. Water from mountain drainage and ground water moving toward the valley

* ditch

filtrates down and recharges the aquifers. The range of wetland types in the designation area, each with varying degrees of water permanence, supports a diversity of plant and animal species, some of which are very rare, such as the slender spiderflower. The SDCNHA provides a comprehensive sampling of the valley's intricate system of wetlands that is fed by watershed runoff, creeks, ditches, ground water and artesian wells.

The amount of federally protected land within the proposed National Heritage Area attests to the natural resources found in the southern portion of the San Luis Valley. The State of Colorado and the Nature Conservancy also protect substantial land holdings in the proposed area. These protected lands include a National Park and Preserve, three National Wildlife Refuges, a National Forest, two National Wilderness Areas, a proposed National Natural Landmark (Rio Grande), Bureau of Land Management lands, 15 State Wildlife Areas, a State Park and the 97,000 acre Nature Conservancy Medano-Zapata Ranch.

Plant species, wildlife and birds are abundant throughout the SDCNHA. A number of plant communities and bird and animal species found in this area have been recognized by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program as globally significant. Rankings of these particular plants, birds and animals put them in the category of vulnerable to extinction. For this reason, protected lands serve as last bastions in preserving species.

Other wildlife in the area boasts large populations of deer, elk, Rocky Mountain sheep and pronghorn. More common furbearers such as beaver are found throughout the region.

Exceptional recreational opportunities abound in the Sangre de Cristo area. There are hundreds of square miles of public lands, thousands of acres of wildlife rich wetlands, marshes, and water bodies and two designated wildernesses that provide for highly diverse recreation experiences. While experiencing this unparalleled scenic beauty, one can find solitude, absorb clean crisp air, gaze upon some of the clearest of night skies and bask in a climate that is dominated by sunlight.

Nature based tourism includes recreational pursuits such as dune skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, camping, biking, bird watching/wildlife viewing, cross-country skiing, hiking, mountaineering, star gazing, fishing and hunting. Both the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness and the San Juan Wilderness areas provide excellent recreation opportunities for visitors seeking more remote backcountry hiking, camping, and mountain and ice climbing experiences.

The Rio Grande, the diversity of ecosystems and life zones, and the intricate system of wetlands that span the area make wildlife viewing phenomenal. The valley is situated on a major flyway and sees a large number of species as great waves of birds pass through on annual migrations. With further enhanced partnerships and interpretive tourist information, several of these areas could be organized into wildlife driving tours. Bird watching guides and tours have the potential to increase visitor traffic tremendously throughout the area.

Cultural based tourism can be experienced through the architecture, development patterns, art, food, lodging and cultural events. Los Caminos Antiguos, the Ancient Roads, is a 129 mile stretch of Colorado highway that links many of the key resources in the proposed SDCNHA. The Byway provides visitors with panoramic views, a strong sense of the past and opportunities to experience the rich culture and traditions of the local people. Along this route one can see and feel the authenticity of the cultural landscape. Visitors can experience numerous historic Hispano communities, such as San Luis, the oldest town in Colorado, listed as a National Historic District, with its plaza, *vega*[†], adobe structures, mission churches, local artifacts, authentic restaurants, cultural museum and B&Bs. On the same trip, visitors can see historic

[†] Meadow or commons

Mormon villages that illustrate the tightly grided streets and clustered homes of the early settlers and pass through the numerous railroad towns that sprung up during the late 1800s. One of the largest railroad towns is Antonito where the narrow gauge Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is located. This historic railroad has vintage steam-powered locomotives and wooden passenger cars that wind through spectacular scenery as it travels through the San Juan Mountains en route to Chama, New Mexico. Fort Garland, the once stronghold of protection for the settlers of the region, is now a fine museum offering interpretation of everyday life. Its one time commander, Kit Carson, and the regiment of buffalo soldiers, who served at the fort, are highlighted with interpretive signage, artifacts and special displays. Reenactment camps and living history events bring bygone times back to life. Many more recreation opportunities exist, but are far too numerous for this testimony to list.

Isolation within these valley walls has been the impetus that has kept the culture intact and the natural resources from being completely exploited. An archaic dialect of 17th Century Spain is still spoken by about 35 percent of the population, showing remnants of centuries past.

In this high mountain valley, isolation has worked to our advantage and to our disadvantage. Although our heritage and culture have been well preserved, the population has remained relatively low. The exodus of our youth to more prosperous areas has left its mark on the ability of families to keep generations-held land. Our financial resources and tax base has not kept pace with urban areas or even with other rural communities. The counties of Conejos and Costilla are two of the poorest in the country. The struggling economies of these counties, as well as their sister county, Alamosa, are in desperate need of economic enhancement. Unemployment averages within these counties is high and per capita income, when compared to the Colorado State average, is low at 45% - 65%. As we search for ways to sustain our agrarian lifestyle, a National Heritage Area designation would compliment existing efforts of attracting heritage travelers through tourism. Heritage tourism and historic preservation are proven economic stimulators and a perfect fit for rural communities. Along with tourism, heritage education to include the traditional arts, language and local history would benefit tremendously from the national designation.

I would like to include in this testimony the process of bringing this dream of National Heritage Area designation from beginning to present day and of the overwhelming support that exists for the designation.

Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway, a 501 (c) (3) not for profit organization, is one of the 24 Colorado scenic byways and traverses three of the southernmost counties of the San Luis Valley. During the research that the Byway conducted, while preparing interpretive material for production, the Board of Directors realized that there was a significant, important, and integrated story within the region that had not been told, nor had it been celebrated. The Byway holds a stake in the cultural and historical preservation of the area. It's not unusual for a Byway, within a State Scenic Byway or National Scenic Byway, to lie within a National Heritage Area.

A consensus of the Board of Directors instructed Byway planners to include the formation of a National Heritage Area in the Strategic Plan for the Byway. Beginning with three public meetings, one in each of the Alamosa, Conejos and Costilla counties, the Byway assessed interest, attendance and the willingness of individuals to help move the project forward.

Attendance and interest from these meetings encouraged us to organize interested parties to work on the designation. A volunteer steering committee was nominated and formed. Today, several of the original steering committee members of 2002 are still actively involved. The

steering committee has been responsible for the majority of the work done thus far on the Heritage Area designation effort and in the creation of the feasibility study.

From those first meetings, we have met regularly over the past six years to plan, organize and take forward the concept. Over the years, we have held numerous meetings and have encouraged individuals to become involved whether on the committee or in other ways. Individuals from our committee have presented at various monthly and quarterly meetings of other non-profits, special interest groups, civic groups, local governments and tourism boards. We have periodically met with the County Commissioners of all three counties to update them on the progress of the designation process. Countless hours have been spent in research and building public support for the project. Most recently a Board of Directors has been formed consisting of twelve member representatives from the three counties, with one county commissioner from each of the participating counties serving on board. The board is in the process of applying for non-profit status, developing Articles of Incorporation and By-laws. The board members are enthusiastic and hard working.

Resolutions supporting the National Heritage Area designation from all three Boards of County Commissioners have been received, as well as supportive resolutions from communities lying within the proposed region. Numerous letters of support have been obtained from local and regional governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, regional economic development entities and individuals. Our State Senator, Gail Schwartz, and our State Representative, Rafael Gallegos, have also shown their support for the project throughout our efforts and have given letters committing their support.

Financially, Los Caminos Antiguos has supported the efforts, and through their non-profit status, individuals and organizations have been able to make cash contributions. The greatest contributions that have impacted our goal of designation have been the overwhelming personal work of our professional volunteers. As I mentioned, countless hours of research have been contributed. That research had its roots in a collaborative scholarly symposium that our steering committee presented in November of 2002. Partnerships with Adams State College, Trinidad State Junior College, Adams State College Title V Office, Jalisco Inc. (a private business) and Los Caminos Antiguos were formed to present the full day, multi-venue symposium on the history, heritage, culture and natural resources that make up the proposed region. Over thirty-one presenters donated their time, travel costs and research to the National Heritage Area effort. Scholarly papers were presented at the symposium and then given to the steering committee to be used in the authoring of the feasibility study. Cultural groups donated performances during the luncheon that was provided with funding from our partners. People from the San Luis Valley and other regions of Colorado and the state of New Mexico came to hear the presentations that were made through lectures and panel discussions.

The feasibility study was researched and authored almost entirely by local historians, authors, scholars, business people and residents of the proposed region. This once again shows the overwhelming support for this designation from a multitude of people within the valley and around the state of Colorado. Shapins Associates, a well known landscape architecture firm specializing in heritage planning and research, contributed significantly to the completion and production of the final study.

Within the planning process, partnerships with our local public land agencies and organizations have been a main focus. Our partners include the Rio Grande National Forest, the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the three National Wildlife Refuges within the SDCNHA boundaries. All of these agencies have been contributors

to the research and writing of the feasibility study. A close working relationship has been established with the nation's newest National Park, the Great Sand Dunes. State agencies such as the Division of Wildlife and Colorado State Parks have all offered technical assistance along the way.

Since the completion of the feasibility study, the group has sought to further Heritage Tourism by participating with other organizations to advance visitor readiness and increase the profile of the region. Preservation projects to protect some historic treasures such as placing the original Denver and Rio Grande Western Depot, circa 1880s, on both the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

To further the cause of the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area's designation, financial contributions from the three counties, non-profit organizations, economic development agencies, chambers of commerce, and other interested parties have been made to fund the travel, lodging and additional expenses for the steering committee members to travel to Washington, D.C. to attend hearings for S. 2037 on June 22, 2006 and again for testimony on S. 443 on March 20, 2007. Benevolent organizations have contributed funding for today's testimony on H.R. 859. These trips to Washington, D.C., to provide valuable testimony would not have occurred without these significant, invaluable donations.

The recognition of the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area's three county region as an important component of America's history is long overdue. From the cultural treasure chest of living history to the abundance of unique natural resources and recreational experiences, this region sits as a diamond among gems.

In conclusion, the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area is worthy of national designation and has met the criteria of the National Park Service. This may be one of the few remaining places in our great country with the integrity worthy of national acclaim. I urge you to act quickly to enact legislation establishing the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.