

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

**Testimony for Congressman John Salazar**

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Good morning. Thank you to Chairman Grijalva and Members of the Subcommittee for hearing testimony regarding the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area.

As you may know, this area holds a special significance to me as it rests in the San Luis Valley, where I am a fifth generation native and still call home.

The Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area in the San Luis Valley has provided extraordinary contributions to Colorado, the history of the West, and our national heritage.

This legislation will direct the National Park Service to assist citizens, organizations, and local governments in Alamosa, Costilla, and Conejos Counties in developing a management plan to guide the continued stewardship of the region's cultural and natural resources.

It will provide a boost to a rural area that continues to face difficult economic times.

Among the oldest settlements in Colorado are the towns of San Luis and Antonito. These towns have successfully preserved their moradas, placitas, historic churches, religious celebrations, and historic festivals, yet the counties they are in, Conejos and Costilla, are among the poorest in America.

This bill helps these communities leverage their cultural capital to spur economic development by providing funds to rebuild historic structures, develop interpretive exhibits, and attract tourism.

It is important to maintain these historic grounds and preserve our lands so that we can educate our children on our country's past, and in this case, my home.

With that said, the history around the Sangre de Cristo area is remarkable.

The Valley was the 1<sup>st</sup> area of Colorado to be settled by people of European descent and received the 1<sup>st</sup> Spanish land grant in 1742.

However, many historians believe that farmers and ranchers from northern New Mexico may have homesteaded in the Valley as early as the mid-1600's.

Since then, the region has been home to Ute, Navajo, Tiwa, Tewa, Kiowa, Hispanic, and Anglo peoples.

These cultures have left a footprint on those of us who live in the Valley today.

While our history is important, it is not the only pride of the Valley. The San Luis Valley also holds stake to countless beautiful sites.

We boast 3 National Wildlife Refuges, 15 State Wildlife Refuges, a National Forest, 2 National Forest Wilderness Areas, and the Great Dunes National Park and Preserve.

These areas provide a home to plants and animals that can't be found in many other parts of our country.

Given this unique setting and distinct level of preservation, it would be hard to find a combination of resources better suited for national designation.

With this in mind, I believe the Sangre de Criso deserves to be named as a National Heritage Area to help preserve the culture and rural way of life that my neighbors value.

Again, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee as you consider this legislation.

And also extend my gratitude to Dennis Lopez for traveling to DC to testify on behalf of the Sangre de Cristo. Like myself, Mr. Lopez is a native of the San Luis Valley and it is an honor to appear before you with one of my neighbors.